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TAQUISARA

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TAQUISARA

BY

F. MARION CRAWFORD

AUTHOR OF "SARACINESCA," "PIETRO GHISLERI," "KATHARINE LAUDERDALE," "THE RALSTONS," ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. II

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TAQUISARA.

CHAPTER XV.

THE Maltese cat died before six o'clock. The poor creature suffered horribly, and Elettra carried it off to her room that Veronica might not see its agony. But Veronica followed her maid. Elettra had laid the beast upon a folded rug on the floor and knelt beside it. It seemed half paralyzed already, but when Veronica knelt down, too, and tried to caress it, the cat sprang from them both in sudden terror. It stood still an instant, wagging its head while its shoulders contracted violently. Then it glided under the chest of drawers to die alone, if possible, after the manner of animals of prey. The girl and her maid heard its rattling breathing and its convulsions: its body thumped against the lower drawer. Then, while Veronica listened and Elettra bent, candle in hand, till her face touched the floor, to see it and get it out, all at once it was quiet.

"Get up," said Veronica, nervously, for she was fond of the creature. "Help me to move the chest of drawers out. Then we can get it out."

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"It is dead," answered Elettra, still on the floor, and thrusting her long, thin arm under the piece of furniture. "But I cannot pull him out," she added. "He is so big!"

She got upon her feet, and together, without much difficulty, the two dragged the chest of drawers away from the wall, and then bent down behind it, with the candle, to look at the dead animal.

"It is quite dead," said Elettra. "Poor beast! What can have happened to it?" Veronica was really sorry, but of the two the maid had been the more fond of the cat. "It must have eaten something."

Elettra looked up, suspiciously, and Veronica drew back a step, half straightening herself. Her foot touched something close to the wall. She stooped again and picked up the package of rat-poison which Matilda had hidden under the chest of drawers on the previous night. She looked at it closely. It had evidently not lain long where she had found it, for there was no dust on it, and the coarse paper had an unmistakably fresh look. The indication of the contents was written upon it in ink, in illiterate characters.

"It is rat-poison!" exclaimed Veronica. "The cat must have eaten some of it! How did it come here?"

She looked at her maid curiously.

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"The cat could not have wrapped it up and folded in the ends of the paper," observed Elettra.

"That is true."

They looked at each other, in considerable astonishment. Then they talked about it. Veronica asked whether Elettra had complained that there were mice in her room, and whether some stupid servant, having a package of rat-poison at hand, had not stuck it under the chest of drawers, not even thinking of opening the paper. Elettra was suspicious.

"At all events, Excellency," she said, "remember that you found it, and that it was carefully closed."

Suddenly, as they were speaking together, Veronica's face changed, and she grasped the corner of the piece of furniture convulsively. Though she had taken the poisoned lump from her cup in time to save her life, enough had been dissolved already to make her very ill.

Again there was dire confusion and fear in the Palazzo Macomer, by night. It was a wholesale poisoning. Veronica, Matilde, and Gregorio were all seized nearly at the same time.

Several of the servants left the house within half an hour after it was known that their masters were all poisoned. Within a fortnight, Bosio Macomer had killed himself and there had been two poisonings. Matilde's maid and a housemaid, the cook, and the butler went quietly to their several

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rooms, took the most valuable of their own possessions, and slipped out. They felt that the house was doomed, with every one in it. But some one had gone for the doctor, and he arrived in a short time. Matilde, to whom all the proper antidotes had been given on the previous day, might have taken them at once, but in the first place, weak and still suffering the consequence of the first dangerous experiment, she was almost unconscious with pain, and secondly, if she had taken an antidote herself, it would have seemed strange that she should not administer it to Veronica, or at least send some one to the young girl to do so. Gregorio lay howling with pain in his room. But Matilde had warned him that it would come, after they had left Veronica's room together, and he knew that everything depended on his not hinting at the truth.

The doctor came to Matilde first. Far away, at the other end of the house, Elettra was with Veronica. She had known what they had done for the countess on the preceding evening, and while the servants were screaming and running hither and thither through the apartments, like scared sheep, the woman had quietly got oil and warm water, and was giving both to her mistress. She knew that a footman had gone for the doctor. When Veronica had first been seized with pain, Elettra had thrust the package of poison into her own pocket, and it was still there.

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By the time the antidote began to act, Elettra believed that the doctor must be in the house. Not wishing to leave Veronica even for a moment, she rang the bell. But no one came. The woman suspected that the doctor had gone first to Matilde, and she decided in a moment that it was better to leave her mistress alone for two or three minutes than not to have the physician's assistance at once. She hastened to Matilde's room. As she passed a half-open door the package of poison in her pocket struck against the door-post and reminded her of its presence, if she needed reminding.

The doctor was bending over Matilde, who seemed very weak. As Elettra entered, she saw that there was no one else in the room. A drawer in a piece of furniture stood open as Matilde had left it, and as Elettra passed, she dropped the package in, and with a movement of her hand covered it with some folded handkerchiefs, from a little heap, shutting the drawer with a quick push. Neither Matilde nor the doctor saw her do it. As Elettra spoke to the doctor, the countess started at the sound of her voice. She thought the maid had come to say that Veronica was dead. Almost violently the woman dragged the physician away with her, and Matilde smiled in the midst of her sufferings.

It would be useless to chronicle the details of

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the night and of the following morning. The three poisoned persons were almost recovered within twelve hours. Of the servants who had fled, Matilde's maid was the first to come back when she learned that no one was dead.

As the night wore on towards dawn, and the countess learned that Veronica was alive and not at all likely to die, she silently turned her face to the wall and tore her pocket-handkerchief slowly with her teeth. In the morning, when the doctor was there, the maid was alone in the room, arranging things as quickly as she could, and hoping that in the confusion of the previous night, her absence might not have been observed. In the drawer, amongst the handkerchiefs and other things, she came upon the package, looked at it in surprise, turned it round and round, and read the words written on it. Then, thinking that she had discovered the clue to the attempted wholesale murder, and that she might obtain pardon for her defection, she came to the bedside and held it up to the doctor. He, too, looked at it, and read the words. Matilde's heavy eyes opened, and then stared as she recognized the package. She thought that of course it had been found in Elettra's room, and was sure of the answer, when she put the question to her maid.

"Where did you find it?" she asked faintly.

"In the drawer, here, Excellency."

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"In the drawer!" cried Matilde, starting up, and leaning on her elbow, as though electrified. "In the drawer? Here, in my room? Why — it was —"

Her head sank back, and her eyes closed. She had nearly betrayed herself, for she was very weak.

"It was not there yesterday — I am sure of it," she said feebly.

"Give it to me," said the doctor, sternly, and he put it into his pocket.

All that day Matilde lay in her room. Gregorio had recovered. He came to her, and when they were alone, he reproached her bitterly and upbraided her in unmeasured language for her failure. Veronica was alive, and his terror of the ruin before him grew stronger with the physical weakness. He was a coward always, but he was now half mad with fear. He laughed hideously, and his face twitched. He sawed the air with extraordinary gestures while he walked up and down in his wife's room, speaking excitedly in a low tone. Matilde turned to the wall and answered nothing. For she could not have found anything to say.

From time to time, during the day, she had news of Veronica. Elettra never left her mistress but once, shortly before twelve o'clock. She went out for a quarter of an hour, and came back bringing fresh eggs, bread, and wine, which she had bought herself.

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"It is poor fare, Excellency," she said, as she boiled the eggs in the tea-urn, "but it is safe. If you are strong enough this afternoon, we will go away. This is not a good house. I do not understand what was done; but it was done to kill you and not to hurt them."

"I think it was," said Veronica. "I am not frightened, but I do not think that I am safe here."

After she had eaten a little and drunk some wine, she felt stronger and wrote a line to the Princess Corleone, asking the latter to receive her for a few days, as she was in trouble. In an hour she had an answer. Bianca, of course, was ready for her whenever she might come. Elettra quickly began to pack such things as her mistress might need immediately.

Veronica lay still, listening to Elettra's movements in the next room. In a flash she had guessed half the truth, and reflexion now brought her most of the rest. She remembered Don Teodoro's earnest face and the quiet eyes that had looked at her through the silver spectacles while he had been speaking. There had been conviction in them, and even then she had felt that he believed the truth of what he said, however mistaken he might be. And now she felt that it was not he who had spoken, but Bosio, through him, that the warning came from beyond the grave,

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and that she had risked her life in disregarding it. She believed that Bosio had been a truthful man, and each detail of what had happened fitted itself to the next, to make up the whole story which the priest had told her. All but Bosio's love for Matilde, and in that Don Teodoro had misunderstood him. He might have loved her in the past. That was possible, and to the young girl's mind, in comparison with all that had recently happened, the wrong of that love dwindled to an insignificant detail. She had not been near enough to loving the man herself to be jealous of his past. And she was glad that he had not told Don Teodoro of his love for herself.

The rest all grew to distinctness and to the coincidence of the fact with the warning. She was brave enough to face danger as well as a man, but there was no reason why she should stay where she was, waiting to be murdered. She had a right to save herself without despising herself as a coward. She therefore said nothing to stop Elettra in her preparations, and the maid silently went on with her work in the other room.

She still felt ill and terribly shaken, but she rose softly, to try her strength, and she found that after the first moment's dizziness she could stand and walk alone. She looked at her hands, and she thought that they had shrunk and were thinner than ever. Then she lay down again and called

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Elettra, and bade her prepare her own belongings and then come and dress her, when she should have finished.

"Yes, Excellency."

That was almost all that the woman had said, since she had boiled the eggs for her mistress's luncheon, and Veronica herself did not speak except to give an order about some detail of the packing. It would have been impossible to talk of what had happened without speaking clearly about Matilde, and Veronica did not wish to do that, though Elettra was of her own people and devotedly attached to her.

Elettra had been careful that no one in the household should learn her mistress's intention of leaving the palace. Veronica intended to go away in a cab, and it would be the question of a moment only to call one. When all was ready, Elettra went out for that purpose herself, and Veronica went without hesitation to Matilde's room. When she entered, the countess was alone, propped with pillows on a low couch near the fire. Her large white hands lay listlessly upon the dark shawl that was drawn over her, and she had thrown a piece of thick black lace over her head. It was nearly four o'clock, and the light was already waning, so that, as she lay with her back to the window, Veronica could hardly see her face. She raised her head slowly

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and wearily as the young girl entered, and then started visibly, as she recognized her.

"It is I," said Veronica, when she had closed the door.

She came and stood beside the couch on which her aunt lay, and she looked down at the reclining woman. Matilde's listless hands suddenly clasped each other.

"Yes," she answered, with an effort. "Are you going out? Are you well enough to go out?" she asked, adding the last question quickly.

"I should go if I were much more ill than I have been," Veronica replied. "I am not coming back."

"Not coming back?" Surprise brought energy into Matilde's voice.

"No. I am not coming back. Do not be astonished. I understand what has happened, and I am going to a safer place."

"What? How? I do not understand." Matilde spoke rapidly and unsteadily. "You must stay here — Gregorio is going to send for the chief of police — there will be an inquiry, and you must answer questions — we suspect one of the servants, who has a grudge against your uncle, and who has tried to murder us all in revenge — "

"Yes," said Veronica, calmly. "It was well arranged, I am sure. If I had not found the rat-poison under the chest of drawers in Elettra's room, you might have thrown suspicion upon her,

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because her husband was murdered at Muro. If I had not found my tea too sweet, I should not have taken out the second piece and given it to the cat. The taste I had of it almost killed me — you have explained the rest to me now. But I knew all that I needed to know."

Matilde put her feet to the ground and slowly rose to her feet while Veronica was speaking. Then she laid her two hands upon the girl's shoulders and stared into her face.

"Do you dare to accuse me of trying to poison you?" she asked in a low, fierce voice.

"Take your hands from me!" cried Veronica, thrusting her back. "Call your husband. I will accuse you both — you and him."

They were women of the same race and name, and both brave. But the elder and stronger felt her nerves growing weak in her when she heard the other's voice. Perhaps courageous people recognize courage and conviction in others more easily than cowards can. Matilde hesitated.

"Call him!" repeated Veronica, in a tone of command. "I insist upon it. He shall hear what I have to say."

"I will call him, that he may see for himself that you are quite mad," answered Matilde. "That is," she added, "if he is well enough to come here from his room." And she moved slowly towards the door.

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"If I am alive, he is well enough to hear me speak," said the young girl.

Matilde stopped, turned, and faced her a moment, as though about to speak angrily. Then she went on. It was best, on the whole, to call her husband, she thought, though her reasoning was confused and uncertain. In her view of matters, the burden of the crime she had tried to commit all fell upon him, and she was willing that he should face Veronica, and realize what he had done. At the same time she believed herself so safe as still to be able to throw the suspicion entirely upon Elettra, though Veronica would protect her. Moreover, though she would not have admitted the fact, her strength was momentarily so broken that she felt it easier to obey the young girl than to visit her and fight out the interview alone.

Veronica did not move while she was gone, but stood quite still, watching the door. She was very pale, with illness and rising anger, but she was not weak, as Matilde was. She had not gone through half so much. Presently Matilde returned, followed by Macomer, wrapped in a dark velvet dressing-gown, his face white and twitching, his usually smooth grey beard unbrushed, and his grey hair in disorder. With drawn lids he looked at Veronica, and in his terror he tried to smile, but there was something at once cowardly and insolent in the expression — there was something else, too,

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which the young girl did not understand, a sort of vacancy of the brow and unnatural weakness of the mouth.

"I am glad that you have come," she said, when the door was shut. "I have not much to say, and I wish you to hear it."

They were all standing. Gregorio steadied himself by the head of the couch, and was as erect as ever.

"I will tell you something which you do not know," said Veronica, fixing her eyes on him. "Before Bosio died he told the whole truth to Don Teodoro Maresca, his friend. And the day after his death, Don Teodoro came and told it all to me."

"Bosio!" exclaimed Gregorio, his knees shaking. "Bosio told —"

"What did Bosio tell?" asked Matilde, interrupting her husband in a loud voice to cover any mistake he might be about to make.

But Veronica had seen Macomer's face and had heard his tone of dread. Whatever doubts she still had, disappeared for the last time.

"He told his friend the whole truth about your management of my fortune," she answered steadily. "He told how you had lost your own in speculation and had taken everything of mine upon which you could lay hands — all my income and much more, so long as you were still my guardian — you and Lamberto Squarci, helping each other.

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And I understand now why you would not give me that money the other day. You had not got it to give me. My aunt must have borrowed it. And Bosio told Don Teodoro, that unless he was married to me, you meant to kill me, because I had signed a will leaving you everything. There was nothing that Bosio did not tell, and Don Teodoro repeated every word of it to me. I thought him mad. But now I know that he was not. I have been saved by a miracle, but you shall not try to murder me again — so I am going away."

Macomer had listened to the end, his face working horribly and his hands grasping the head of the couch. When Veronica paused, his head fell forward as he stood. Even Matilde could not speak, for a moment. The revelation that Bosio had told all before he died, and that Veronica knew it, fell upon her like a blow, with stunning force. The first words came from Gregorio.

"Bosio!" he exclaimed in a loud voice. "The devil take his soul!"

"God will have mercy upon the soul that was lost through your deeds," said the young girl, solemnly. "Amongst you, you drove him to madness — it was not his fault. But for his soul you shall answer, as well as for your deeds — and that is much to answer for, to Heaven and to me. You neither of you have the strength to deny one word of what Bosio said —"

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"He was mad!" Matilde broke in. "You are mad, too —"

"Oh no!" interrupted Veronica, with contempt. "You cannot fasten that upon me. I am not mad at all, and I will show you what it is to be sane, for I know that every word of what Bosio told Don Teodoro was true. I was foolish not to believe it at once — it almost cost my life to believe you better than you are."

"He was quite insane," muttered Gregorio, in almost imbecile repetition of what his wife had said.

Matilde made another great effort to impose her remaining strength upon the young girl.

"Whether you are mad or not, you shall not stand there accusing me of monstrous crimes!" she cried, moving a step towards Veronica, and raising her hand with a menacing gesture.

"Shall not?" repeated Veronica, proudly, and instead of retreating she advanced calmly to meet her aunt.

"Would you not rather that I accused you here, and proved you guilty and let you go free, than that I should do as much in a court of justice? You know what the end of that would be — penal servitude for you both — and unless —" she paused, for she was growing hot and she wished to speak with coolness.

"Unless?" Matilde uttered the one word scornfully, still facing her.

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"Unless you will confess the truth, here, before I leave the house, I will do what I can to have you both convicted," said Veronica. "That is your only chance. That or the galleys. Choose. You are thieves and murderers. Choose."

She spoke like a man to those who would have murdered her and had failed, but who had robbed her with impunity for years. Gregorio Macomer's face was all distorted. All at once his maniac laugh broke out. But it stopped suddenly and unexpectedly, and it changed to another sort of laughter — low and not unpleasant to hear, but a little vacant. Matilde turned her head slowly and gazed at him. He was bending now and resting his elbows on the head of the couch, instead of his hands, and he held his hands themselves opposite to each other, crooking first one finger and then another, and making one finger bow to the other, as children sometimes do, and laughing vacantly to himself, with a queer little chuckle of enjoyment. Veronica stared. Matilde held her breath. Still he laughed softly.

"Marionettes," he said, looking up at his wife, his little eyes wide open. "Do you see the marionettes? This is Pulcinella. This is his wife. Do you see how they quarrel? Is it not pretty? I always like to see the marionettes in the streets. Ha! ha! ha! see them!"

And he played with his fingers and made them bob and bow, like little dolls.

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"He is ill," said Matilde, in a low, uneasy voice. "Pay no attention to him."

He had always intended to save himself by pretending to go mad, but even Matilde was amazed at his power of acting.

"He will recover," answered Veronica, coldly. "You can still understand me, at all events, even if he cannot. You have your choice. If you tell me the truth, I will not allow any inquiry. I will take over my fortune, if you have left me any, and for the sake of my father's name, I will not bring you to justice, even if you have ruined me. But I warn you — and it is the last time, for I am going — if you still try to deny what I know to be the truth, the prosecution shall begin to-morrow. You will not be able to murder me, for I shall be protected, and with all your abominable courage you are not brave enough to try and kill me here, before I leave this room. No — you are not. I am not afraid of you. But you have reason to be afraid. You will be convicted. Nothing can save you. Though people do not know me as they knew my father, — though I am only a girl and came to you, straight from the convent, — I know that I have power, and I shall use it. I am not poor Elettra, whom you intended to accuse. I am the Princess of Acireale; I have been your ward; you and your husband have robbed me, and you have tried to murder me. Though I am only a girl,

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justice will move more quickly for me than it would for you, even if you could call it to help you. Now choose, and waste no time."

While she had been speaking, Macomer had stared at her with an expression of genuine childish amusement.

"Poor Pulcinella!" he exclaimed softly. "How your wife can talk, when she is angry! Poor fellow!"

The tone was so natural that Matilde again looked at him uneasily, and moved nearer to him, not answering Veronica.

"Come, Gregorio," she said, "you are ill. Come to your room — you must not stay here."

"I am sorry you do not like the marionettes," he said gravely. "They always amuse me. Stay a little longer."

Veronica supposed that he was ill from the effects of the poisoning and that he was in some sort of delirium. But she did not pity him, and was relentless. She moved nearer to her aunt.

"Answer me!" she said sternly. "This is the last time. If you deny the truth now, I will go to the chief of police at once."

"Oh! poor old Pulcinella!" cried Macomer, laughing gently. "How she gives it to him!"

Matilde was almost distracted.

"You will be arrested at once," said Veronica, pitilessly.

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"Never mind, Pulcinella!" exclaimed Macomer. "Courage, my friend! You know you always get away from the policeman! Ha! ha! ha!"

Matilde saw Veronica moving to go to the door. She straightened herself and pointed to her husband.

"Yes," she said. "He did it — and he is mad."

Her voice was firm and clear, for the die was cast. When she had spoken, she turned from them both towards the fireplace, and hid her face in her hands. If he could act his madness out, she, at least, would still be free and alive. Veronica stood still a moment longer, looking back.

"That is the other piece," said Macomer, thoughtfully. "Pulcinella does not go mad in this one. The man has forgotten the parts. It is a pity — it was so amusing."

There was silence for a moment. Matilde did not look round.

"I think he will recover," said Veronica. "But I am glad you have told the truth. I promise that you shall be safe."

In a moment she was gone.

"Just so," said Macomer, speaking to himself. "He forgot the words of the piece, and so he made it end rather abruptly. Let us go home, Matilde, since it is over."

"It is of no use to go on acting insanity before me," answered Matilde, with a bitter sigh, as she

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raised her face from her hands and moved away from the fireplace, not looking at him.

"That is the reason why Pulcinella's wife disappeared so suddenly," he replied. "You see, there are two pieces which the marionettes act. In the one which begins with the quarrel — "

"I tell you it is of no use to do that!" cried Matilde, angrily, and beginning to walk up and down the room, still keeping her eyes from the face she hated.

"How nervous you are!" he exclaimed, with irritation. "I was only trying to explain — "

"Oh, I know! I know! Keep this acting for the doctors! You will drive me really mad!"

"The doctors?" He stared at her and smiled childishly. "Oh no!" he exclaimed. "The doctor is in the other piece — I was going to explain — "

She turned with a fierce exclamation upon him and grasped his arm, shaking him savagely, as though to rouse him. To her horror, he burst into tears.

"You hurt!" he whined. "You hurt me! Oh, poor little Gregorio!"

He was really mad, and there was no more acting for him, as the tears streamed down his vacant face, which no longer twitched at all.

His mind had broken down under Veronica's relentless accusation and threat of vengeance.

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The miserable woman's strength was all but gone, when she sat down, alone in the room with her mad husband, and once more buried her face in her hands.

He whined and cried a little while to himself, and rubbed his arm where she had taken hold so roughly; but presently his tears dried again, and he leaned over the end of the couch on his elbow, and above her bowed, veiled head he crooked his fingers at each other, and made his hands nod and bob to each other, like little dolls, laughing gently, with a chuckle now and then, at the funny things he heard Pulcinella saying to his wife.

That was the end of the attempt to murder Veronica Serra, and that was the end of the old life at the Palazzo Macomer.

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CHAPTER XVI.

VERONICA was not only merciful but generous to Matilde, when she finally set her own fortune in order. Through Pietro Ghisleri she found an honest and discreet man of business, whose fortune and good name placed him above suspicion, and who arranged matters to her satisfaction, and as far to her advantage as was possible under the circumstances.

Bosio had possessed a competency, which, as he died intestate, became the inheritance of his brother. But the latter, owing to the time required for the legal formalities, had not been able to get possession of the money before he became insane, and was placed in an asylum at Aversa, where he was probably to remain until he died. Bosio's little fortune remained intact, and the use of it reverted to Matilde Macomer. Veronica paid Gregorio's expenses at the asylum.

As for the Macomer property, she found herself obliged to raise money to meet the mortgages which were due on the first of January after the final catastrophe, since Macomer had used up her income and left her momentarily in difficulties. The banker

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who was managing matters for her advanced the sums necessary out of his private fortune, and the estate at Caserta, together with the Palazzo Macomer in Naples, became the property of Veronica Serra. By the estimates made they were worth more than the money raised upon them by mortgage, and by the deeds of sale the balance was to be paid to Matilde. This, with Bosio's property, was enough to make her independent, and, for the time being, Veronica allowed her to live in the house.

Lamberto Squarci was called in constantly, as having been Macomer's agent. By agreement, Veronica caused the accounts of the estate to be balanced from Macomer's books, so that everything appeared to be in order, and she formally took over her fortune from Matilde and Cardinal Campodonico, who knew nothing of the true state of affairs. Since Veronica knew everything and was satisfied, it was not necessary that he should be informed of what had taken place, and this secrecy was the keeping of Veronica's promise that Matilde should be safe.

When all was settled upon a permanent basis, Veronica found herself still exceedingly rich. Matilde was provided for. Gregorio was in the insane asylum. The cardinal and the world at large were in total ignorance of all the truth except the facts which could not be concealed; namely, that Bosio Macomer had killed himself and that his brother was mad. The latter fact explained

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the former; for everybody said that there was insanity in the family, and that Bosio had been mad, too.

Veronica's first, chiefest, and most immediate difficulty lay in finding a reason which she could give Bianca and the cardinal for refusing to live any longer with her aunt. She cared very little what society might say, for she was at once too inexperienced to attach the true measure of importance to its opinion, or to understand that the unhappy Princess Corleone was not in a position to socially take the place of a chaperon; and, at the same time, she was too great a personage to be easily intimidated by the fear of gossip. Bianca was her friend, and to her she went unhesitatingly, feeling quite sure that she was doing right.

There were people, however, who thought differently; first among whom were the cardinal and the Duchessa della Spina, Gianluca's mother. The cardinal did not return from Rome until after the first of January, but the duchessa came to see Veronica at Bianca's villa within a few days after Veronica had left her aunt.

The good lady implored her to return to the countess, in the name of society or of religion, but Veronica was not quite sure which she invoked, for her language was not very coherent. She was not more than five-and-forty years of age, but she seemed to be already an old woman. Her hair was

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grey, she had lost many teeth, and she dressed, as Veronica wickedly said to Bianca, like the devil's grandmother. She spoke affectionately, as well as reprovingly, however, having known both Veronica's parents, and as having been a third cousin of her mother; and she begged the young girl to come and stay as long as she pleased at the Della Spina palace, as her guest.

Veronica thanked her, but declined to change her quarters. It was clear that the Duchessa wished her to marry Gianluca, and had by no means given up all hopes of the match. It was all the more clear, because she never mentioned him, though Veronica knew that he was no better; and Veronica herself, though sorry for him, asked no questions, lest any inquiry should be taken for a sign of an inclination which she did not feel. The Duchessa smiled reprovingly and shook her head when she went away. It would have been quite impossible for her to explain to Veronica why she should not remain longer than necessary under Bianca's roof. And, indeed, the matter might not have been easy to explain. Veronica was glad when she was gone.

The cardinal was not so easy to deal with. He was a man of singular intensity of opinion, so to speak, when he held any fixed opinion at all, and he was displeased when he learned that Veronica was with his niece. On the other hand, the fact that Bianca was his brother's daughter gave Veron-

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ica a weapon against him. Why should she not spend a month or two with the niece of her former guardian, her old friend, the companion of her convent school days in Rome? Would his Eminence tell her why not? His Eminence replied by saying that he had never approved of Bianca's marriage; that Prince Corleone was, in his opinion, as great a good-for-nothing as ever had appeared in Neapolitan society, and was at present known to be leading a dissipated life in Paris and London. Veronica answered that all these things were to the discredit of Corleone, but that Bianca was to be pitied, since she had been so unlucky as to marry a scoundrel, and that, on the whole, it was better that Corleone should stay away from her, if he could not behave decently at home. The cardinal retorted that no young girl should stay two months in the house of any woman who was practically separated from her husband, for whatever reason; and he said that this was an accepted tradition in society, and that society was not to be despised. He was not prepared for the answer he received.

"I am Veronica Serra," said the young girl, with a smile. "Society is society. When we need each other, we will try and agree."

This was somewhat enigmatic, to say the least of it, and the cardinal was not quite sure whether he understood it. He should be very sorry, he said, to think that his old friend's daughter meant to cut

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herself off from the world in which she had so important a part to play. Of course, he had no longer any actual authority by which to direct her actions. She was of age, and if she chose to live alone, without so much as an elderly companion, no one could hinder her. To this Veronica promptly answered that she had come to Bianca's house in order not to be alone.

"And why," inquired the cardinal, watching her face keenly, "have you determined that you will no longer live with your aunt Macomer, who is your only near relative and your natural companion?"

This was the real question, and Veronica had hoped that he would not ask it; but being a good diplomatist, and knowing how hard it would be to answer, the wise prelate had kept it back as a hammer with which to drive the wedges he had previously inserted one by one.

"I had understood that you were always the best of friends," he added, while she was silent for a moment.

"We have not agreed so well lately," said Veronica. "Besides, you could hardly expect me to be happy in a house where such horrible things have lately happened."

"You could live somewhere else, and have your aunt with you," suggested the cardinal.

"You do not understand!" Veronica smiled.

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"That would be quite impossible. She has always been accustomed to being mistress in the house, and if she lived with me, she would be my guest. She would not like to accept that position. Just imagine! I would not even let her order dinner."

"You might let her do that, by way of a compromise, my child."

"Oh — but she does it abominably! That is one reason for not living with her!"

The cardinal could not help laughing at Veronica's statement of the case.

"I see," he said. "She poisoned you!" And he laughed again.

"Yes," answered Veronica. "That was exactly it. She poisoned us all."

She smiled to herself at the terrible truth of the words which so much amused the cardinal; but she continued to talk in the same strain, giving him the infinity of small reasons, under which a clever woman will hide her chief one, confusing a man's impression of the whole by her superior handling of its parts, exaggerating the one detail and belittling the next, until all proportion and true perspective are lost, and the man leaves her with the sensation of having been delicately taken to pieces, and put together again with his face turned backwards, over his shoulders.

When, on leaving him, Veronica deposited the traditional and perfunctory kiss upon his sapphire

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ring, Cardinal Campodonico felt that his late ward had been a match for him at all points, and that after all it was not such a great thing to be a man, if one could not do better than he had done. If he consoled himself with the fact that Eve had outargued Adam, he was mentally confronted by the reflexion that Adam had been a layman, and had not been called upon to sustain the dignity of a cardinal and an archbishop. He determined, however, that he would renew the attempt before long. If Veronica would not leave Bianca's villa, and live in some other way, he would oblige his niece to cut the situation short and go away for a journey.

But Veronica had no intention of quartering herself upon her friend for any great length of time; and perhaps, under the circumstances, she did the best thing she could in going directly to her. Bianca was discreet, and lived very quietly, receiving few people and going very little into the world. The villa itself was at some distance from the centre of Neapolitan life, so that the average idle man or woman thought twice before calling, without a distinct object, and merely for a cup of tea and a cup-of-tea's worth of gossip. There was not that constant coming and going of visitors in every degree of intimacy which might have been expected in the house of a woman of Bianca Corleone's beauty and position. The world is easily tired of unhappy people, and men soon weary of worshipping a god-

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dess who never smiles upon them. As for the fact that Pietro Ghisleri was frequently at the villa, society refrained from throwing stones, in consideration of the extreme brittleness of its own glass dwelling. Ghisleri was disliked in Naples, because he was a Tuscan; but Bianca, as a Roman, might have been more popular.

It need hardly be said that she preferred the isolation she enjoyed to a gayer existence. To Veronica it seemed as though she herself had never before known what liberty was. The whole mode of life was different from anything to which she had been accustomed. The villa was near the country, and its own grounds were not small. Bianca was passionately fond of dogs and horses, for her father bred horses on his lands in the Roman Campagna, and she had been accustomed to animals from her childhood. She taught Veronica to ride, and the fearless young girl was a good pupil. They rode out together early in the morning, westward, towards Baiæ, and up to the king's preserves, and often through some lands of Veronica's which lay in the rich Falernian district within an easy distance. A groom followed them. Ghisleri very rarely joined the party.

Bianca Corleone had another accomplishment which was very unusual at that time, and is still uncommon, among Italian women. She could fence, and was fond of the exercise. She had been a deli-

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cate child, and it had long been feared that her lungs were weak, so that she had been encouraged from her earliest youth in everything which could contribute towards increasing her strength. Her brother, Gianforte, had even as a boy been a good fencer. He was devotedly attached to his only sister, and as she had not gone to the convent school until she had been fifteen years old, they had been constantly together until then, he being only a couple of years older than she. One day she had taken up one of his foils, laughing at the idea, and had made him show her how to hold it; and he had forthwith amused her by teaching her to fence, on rainy days in Rome, when she could not ride. It had seemed to do her good, and her father had allowed her to have regular lessons, until she could handle a foil very fairly, for a girl. She herself liked it, but she rarely alluded to it, regarding it as a rather unfeminine amusement, and being, at the same time, a most womanly woman.

But in her villa she had a large empty room, admirably adapted for fencing, and three times weekly a famous master came and gave her lessons. To her surprise Veronica had shown an irresistible desire to learn also, and had insisted upon being properly taught by the fencing-master. The young girl had soon shown that she had far more natural ability and aptitude for the skilled exercise than Bianca had possessed when she had first begun.

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Her lean young figure, long arms, and unusual quickness gave her every advantage with a foil, and her extraordinary tenacity and determination to do well at it helped her to progress rapidly. Before she had practised two months, though by no means yet as good as Bianca, she had been able to sustain a long bout with her very creditably indeed.

Bianca had a very different temperament and organization. She was never really strong, though exercise had developed her strength to the utmost. She did many things well, but did nothing with that sort of conviction, so to say, which proceeds from conscious inward vigour. When she was not actually riding or fencing, or doing something of the sort, there was a languor in her movements and her manner which told that she had no great vital force upon which to draw. Those who already know something of her story, will remember that her life was short as well as sad.

She watched Veronica with interest, noting how suddenly the girl changed and developed in her new liberty. She had never suspected her of many tastes and inclinations which now showed themselves for the first time. She found that a certain simplicity of view and judgment which she had set down to girlish innocence, was, in reality, the natural bent of Veronica's character. There was a fearless directness in the girl's ways, which delighted Bianca Corleone.

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The two young women were alone one afternoon, not long after Veronica had come, when Taquisara and Gianluca appeared together. It was a part of Bianca's way of showing her indifference to the world, to receive any one who came, whenever she was at home. No one should ever be able to say that he or she had not been admitted when Bianca was in the villa.

At the door of the drawing-room, Veronica could see that Gianluca tried to make his friend enter before him, and that Taquisara pushed him forward, with a little friendly laugh of encouragement. It happened that she was seated just opposite to the door. Gianluca came on, and went directly towards Bianca. He was thinner and more transparent than ever. Veronica could almost fancy that she could see the light through his face. She thought he was slightly lame; or, at least, that he walked with a little difficulty.

Bianca looked up kindly, as she gave him her hand, for she had always liked him. Taquisara came to her a moment later, and both men turned to Veronica. Gianluca evidently did not wish to sit down by Veronica, whereas Taquisara, in order to oblige him to do so, took a chair on the other side of Bianca, and spoke to her at once. Gianluca seated himself upon a chair half-way between Bianca and Veronica.

Possibly Bianca resented the Sicilian's cool way

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of forcing her to talk with him, as though he knew that she should prefer to do so. For many reasons she was unduly sensitive to the slightest appearance of anything even faintly resembling a liberty. She answered what he said, and made a remark in her turn; but, without waiting for his reply, she looked round at Gianluca and spoke to him, interrupting something which he was trying to say to Veronica. In almost any situation, such a proceeding would have been tactless; but Bianca had seen the result of the meeting between Gianluca and Veronica on the former occasion, and she guessed rightly that if they were forced into the necessity of exchanging commonplaces, there would be an even more complete failure now than there had been before. Taquisara had thrust him upon Veronica in an excess of friendly zeal for his interests. He kept his place for a few moments, and then, seeing Bianca's intention, rose and went to Veronica's other side. Gianluca immediately drew his chair nearer to Bianca.

Veronica did not remember afterwards how the Sicilian opened the conversation, nor what she herself at first said. In spite of the strong impression he had produced upon her when they had met in the garden three or four weeks earlier, she now looked away from him, watching the other two as they talked.

She saw at a glance that Gianluca's manner with

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Bianca was not at all what it was with herself. He looked ill and worn; but his face had brightened, his tone was light and cheerful, and he was evidently saying amusing things, for Bianca laughed audibly, which was rare with her, even when she and Veronica were alone together. He was at his ease; instead of seeming awkward he had an especial grace, beyond that of ordinary men; instead of being visibly disturbed by the sound of his own voice, he appeared to be almost as sure of himself and of what he was going to say as Taquisara.

Veronica wondered why she had never noticed him before, except when he was talking with her. He was ill and weak, but he was undeniably a noticeable man. She remembered all that his friend had said of him, and her own disappointment after her last meeting with him, and she all at once realized that she had only seen the man at his worst. She watched him narrowly. He must have felt her eyes upon him, for he turned without apparent reason, and met them. Instantly the blood mounted to the roots of his hair, and he looked away again, and stumbled and hesitated in the answer he gave to what Bianca had last said.

But Veronica remembered very distinctly his speeches to her, and she recalled in contrast the words Bosio had spoken to her just before he died. Then she turned her head, and listened to Taquisara.

"What did you say?" she asked.

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"I have not the slightest idea," replied the Sicilian, with a little laugh. "I suppose it must have been a compliment, and I did not expect any answer, of course."

"I should have thanked you, if I had heard it," answered Veronica, smiling rather absently, for she was still thinking of Gianluca.

"A man never expects thanks from a woman," said Taquisara. "Shall you stay long with the Princess Corleone?"

"I do not know. I have not decided. Why do you ask?"

"Was I indiscreet?"

"No. Of course not. I thought you might have some reason for asking."

"A general reason, perhaps," answered Taquisara. "You have been in trouble. I suppose that you have been unhappy, and that you will change your life in some way — so I asked what you were going to do."

"As for staying here or not, I have not yet decided. But what I mean to do would not interest you at all. Before very long, I shall probably go to Muro."

"To Muro! I have often wished to see the place where they murdered Queen Joanna."

"I have never been there myself, though it belongs to me," answered Veronica. "Her ghost has it all to itself now. They say that she sits

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at the head of the grand staircase, once a year, at midnight, and shrieks. If you wish to see Muro, you had better go before I am there," she added, with a smile. "I shall be there alone, and I could not possibly receive you, as I could not even offer you a cup of tea, you know."

"What an absurd institution society is," observed Taquisara, with contempt. "The priest says, 'Ego conjungo vos'; and you are licensed to snap your fingers at everything that has bound you until that moment, as though the law of your marriage were your divorce from law."

"That sounds clever," said Veronica; "but I do not believe it is."

He laughed, indifferently; and after a moment or two, she looked at him, and smiled.

"I did not mean to be so rude," she said.

So they talked in small, objectless remarks, and questions, and answers, neither witty nor quite witless; but Veronica did not refer to Gianluca, and Taquisara knew that for the present he had better let matters alone. Presently Bianca spoke across to Veronica, and the conversation became general. In the course of it, Gianluca spoke to Veronica, and she answered him, and then asked him a question. She was surprised to find that, so long as the others were joining in whatever was said, he seemed quite at his ease, though his colour came and went frequently. On the whole, she had

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a much better impression of him this time than she had retained after the former meeting, when he had seemed so utterly helpless and shy in her presence. But when both men rose to go away she could not help comparing them again.

Even then, it seemed to her that the comparison was less unfavourable to Gianluca than she had expected that it must be. He was tall and well-proportioned, and in spite of the slight difficulty in walking, which she had to-day noticed for the first time, he was graceful and of easy carriage. His extreme languor in moving was, perhaps, what displeased her the most. When he had entered the room, she had been annoyed at his coming; but now she was rather sorry, than otherwise, that he was going away so soon. Possibly, as she had expected nothing, she was the more easily satisfied. Taquisara, too, had disappointed her. He had talked very much like any one else, and not at all as he had talked at that first meeting. Veronica felt that she was indifferent. Bosio's untimely death had terribly changed the face of the world for her, she thought.

A cold listlessness, unfamiliar to her nature, came over her when the two men were gone. Before long Ghisleri appeared, and there was tea and more conversation. He was thought to be an agreeable man, and people said that he talked well. Veronica wondered vaguely what Bianca saw in him that

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made her like him so much. But it struck her that the question had not presented itself to her before that day, and that, on the whole, she liked her friend's friend very well.

Presently she left them to themselves in the drawing-room and went to her own room to write a long letter to Don Teodoro, who was now in Muro, and actively engaged in carrying out her wishes for improving the condition of the poor there. As she wrote, her interest in life revived, after having been unaccountably suspended for half an hour, and she felt again all her enthusiasm for the chief object she now had in view.

Soon after this, too, she began to examine the state of the big farms through which she often rode with Bianca, asking questions of the people and entering into conversation with the local under-steward when she chanced to meet him. As was to be expected, the news that the young princess now took an active interest in the administration of her estates soon went abroad amongst the peasants. They soon knew her by sight and were only too ready to come and stand at her stirrup and pour out the tale of their woes, since she was condescending enough to listen. Sometimes, if she found a case of anything like oppression, she interfered. Sometimes, and this was what more often happened, she helped some poor man with money — in order that he might be able to pay his rent to herself. Bianca

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laughed once at a charity of this kind, but Veronica held her own.

"The rule is for everybody," she said. "They must pay their rents, or go. If I choose to help those who have had trouble, that is my affair, and not the business of the under-steward with whom they have to do. Besides, if the rent is remitted this year, they will expect the same thing in the future, whereas they know that a little money is a passing charity on which they cannot count with certainty. The less publicity there is about charity, the more of self-respect remains to those who profit by it."

Bianca glanced sideways at Veronica's face as the latter finished speaking, and she felt that the girl was not cast in the same mould as herself.

"I wonder whether you will ever marry," she said thoughtfully, after a short pause.

"Why? What has that to do with it?" asked Veronica.

"Your husband will find that it has a great deal to do with it, my dear," Bianca answered, with a smile, and speculating upon the possible fate of the Princess of Acireale's future husband.

"Oh, — of course, I should not let him interfere in anything of this kind," said Veronica, gravely. "He should not come between me and my people."

She sat very straight on her horse, and the girl's small head and aquiline features had a dominating

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expression. A struggling man, with such a look, is a man who means to win, and generally does, whatever the nature of the race may be.

"But I shall never marry," Veronica added presently, and her face softened as she thought of the dead betrothed. "There is plenty to do in the world, without marrying, if one will only do it."

"If you do not, there will be one free man more in the world," answered Bianca.

Veronica laughed a little.

"I daresay I should have my own way," she said.

The longer Veronica stayed with her, the more thoroughly was Bianca convinced of this, and she wondered why it should have taken her so long to discover that the quiet, sallow-faced, gentle-mannered little girl, whom she had first known at the convent school, was developing a character which might some day astonish every one who should attempt to oppose her. It had been a growth of strength, with an accentuation of wilfulness, and it had not been at all apparent at first.

So they lived quietly together, in spite of the Cardinal Campodonico's objections and arguments, and, little by little, Veronica became quite used to her absolute independence of plan and action, and the idea of taking an elderly gentlewoman for a companion grew more and more distasteful to her.

Meanwhile her aunt was living all alone at the

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Palazzo Macomer. Many communications passed between the two, about matters of business, during the earlier weeks after their final separation, but they did not meet. As neither of them ever went into the world, it was extremely improbable that they should meet at all, except by agreement.

Gianluca came to the villa again, ten days after the visit last spoken of. And after that he came often, at irregular intervals, generally once or twice a week. The first disappointing impression, which Veronica had retained so long, gradually wore away, and she liked him very much better than she had ever thought possible. Bianca never left the two alone together. She felt more than ever responsible for Veronica, now, and bound to observe the customs and traditions in which both had been brought up. She was wise enough to know, too, that after such an unlucky beginning, it would be better for Gianluca if a long time passed before he had another chance of pouring out his heart to the young girl. Things might go by contraries, she thought. Contempt might turn to familiarity, familiarity to friendship, and friendship to love. The first change had already taken place, and the others might come in time.

Before the spring came, Veronica knew that Taquisara had not been guilty of exaggeration in describing his friend's character. Gianluca was all that his friend had painted him, and perhaps

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more. Unfortunately, he was not at all the kind of man whom Veronica would ever be inclined to fancy for a husband. It was easy for her to respect him, as she came to know him better; it would have been hard not to like him, but it seemed impossible to her that she should ever love him.

Taquisara came very rarely — not more than three or four times in the course of the winter. He came alone, and did not stay long. Veronica saw that he avoided her on those few occasions, and preferred to talk with Bianca, though she was sometimes aware that he was looking at her earnestly, when her eyes were half turned from him.

Gianluca seemed to grow a little stronger towards the spring. At least, he was less transparently thin; but the difficulty he had in walking was more apparent than before.

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CHAPTER XVII.

As Gianluca's spirits revived, and he began to take courage again and find new hope that Veronica might marry him after all, her position as a permanent guest in Bianca's house became a subject of especial displeasure to the Della Spina family. They wished to renew their proposals for a marriage, and they found themselves stopped by the fact that Veronica was no longer under the charge of any relative to whom they could have communicated their offer.

No one knew exactly what had happened before Christmas at the Palazzo Macomer excepting the persons concerned; but there is inevitably a certain amount of publicity about all business transactions connected with real estate, and somehow a story had filtered from the financial to the social world, which more or less explained Veronica's conduct. It was said that Gregorio, whom most people had detested, had mismanaged her fortune, though nothing was hinted about any great fraud; and people added that when the day of reckoning had come he had found himself ruined, and had lost his mind; Matilde, as guardian, had incurred

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the young princess's displeasure, but the latter had treated her generously, allowing her to live in the palace, which was now undoubtedly Veronica's property. Some persons told a story of an attempt made by a servant to poison the Macomer household, but the majority laughed at the tale, and said that Gregorio had been too poor, or too stingy, to have his copper saucepans properly tinned, and that a grain of verdigris would poison half a regiment, as every Italian knows.

However that might be, no one was responsible for Veronica, but Veronica herself, unless Cardinal Campodonico still had some authority over her, which seemed more than doubtful. The old Duca made him a formal visit, and a formal proposition. His Eminence smiled, looked grave, smiled again, and replied that in a long and varied experience of the world he could not remember to have met with just such a case; that so far as he could understand, the young Princess of Acireale was her own mistress, and would make her own choice, if she made any; but that she had been heard to say that she would never marry at all. This, however, the cardinal thought impossible.

"Then," said the Duca della Spina, "you advise me to go directly to the young lady and ask her whether she will marry my son."

"My friend," replied the cardinal, "this is a case in which I would rather not give advice. I have

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no doubt that whatever you do will be well done, and I wish you all possible success."

The old Duca shuffled out of the cardinal's study, more puzzled than ever, and went home to tell his wife and Gianluca and Taquisara the result of the interview. Taquisara was in the confidence of the family, and spent much of his time with his friend.

"I am at my wits' end," concluded the old nobleman, shaking his head, and looking sorrowfully at his son. "If you wish it, I will go to Donna Veronica myself. It would be — well — very informal, to say the least. Poor Gianluca! My poor boy! If you would only be satisfied to marry your cousin Vittoria, it would be a question of days! Of course — I understand — her complexion is an obstacle," he added reflectively. "It will probably improve, however."

No one answered him. Taquisara broke the silence, after a pause.

"You must either speak to the Princess Corleone," he said, "or Gianluca must speak to Donna Veronica for himself."

Gianluca said nothing to him, but by a glance he reminded his friend of his former attempt. So they came to no conclusion, though it was clear that Veronica now liked Gianluca quite enough, in their opinion, to marry him at once. But he himself, remembering his discomfiture, knew that the time had not yet come, though he had hopes that it

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might not be far off. On that very day he went to Bianca's villa, and stayed an unreasonably long time, in the hope that Ghisleri might appear, for he found Bianca and Veronica alone. Pietro would have talked with Bianca, and he himself would have had a chance, perhaps, to judge of his actual position. He was no longer shy and awkward, now, when he was with the young girl. But Ghisleri did not come, and Gianluca went home, disappointed and disconsolate.

"I suppose that if we were in Sicily," he said to Taquisara on the following morning, "you would propose to carry her off by force. You once advised me to do something of the sort."

"That is a proceeding which needs the consent of the lady," answered the Sicilian. "The 'force' is employed against the relations. Now Donna Veronica has none to speak of so far as I can see. It is a case for persuasion."

Gianluca sighed. Matters were at a deadlock, and Veronica had announced her intention of going to Muro alone, before long. Once established there, she might stay in the mountains until the following autumn, unapproachable in her maiden solitude, as she had told Taquisara. Gianluca might knock at her gate, there, but he would certainly not be admitted.

"You despise me," he said to his friend. "You think me weak and helpless, and you fancy that if

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you were in my place you could do better. But I do not believe you could."

"No," replied the other. "I do not believe so, either. And I do not at all despise you. You have only one chance — to make her love you. No man is to be despised because a woman does not love him. It is not his fault."

"I feel as though it were," said Gianluca. "I am sure that if I could change, if I could make myself different in some way — but that is absurd, of course."

"One cannot suddenly become some one else." For himself, without vanity, Taquisara was probably glad of the fact, but he was sincerely sorry for his friend. "You might write to her," he suggested.

"Love-letters — to Donna Veronica?" Gianluca smiled incredulously. "You do not know her!"

"I know her a little," replied Taquisara. "All women like to receive letters from men who love them, if they are well expressed and sincere."

"How horribly practical you are sometimes!" exclaimed the younger man, unaccountably irritated at his friend's generalizations.

Taquisara laughed and knocked the ashes from his long black cigar.

"You came to me for advice, not for sentiment," he observed presently. "Perhaps I am a bad adviser, but that is the worst you can say of me. I daresay I do not understand women. I have

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known a few pretty well, but that is all. I am not a lady killer, and I certainly never wished to marry. You must not expect much of me — but what little there is to expect will be practical. Perhaps Ghisleri could advise you better than I. He is a queer fellow. If he ever cuts his throat, he will not die of it — his heart and his head will go on living separately, just as they do now."

Gianluca smiled again, for the description of the man was keen and true, as men knew him.

"No," he answered; "I shall not consult Ghisleri. You and I are different enough to understand each other. He and I are not, though he is a good friend of mine."

"I should not say that you resemble Ghisleri in any way," observed Taquisara, bluntly.

"You may not see it, but I feel it. It is not easy to explain. He and I feel about many things in the same way, but we look at ourselves differently."

"That sounds like a woman's speech!" said Taquisara. "But you are always making fine distinctions which I cannot understand. What do you mean when you say that you look at yourselves differently? How do you look at yourselves?"

"Do you never think about yourself, as though you were another person, and were judging yourself like a man you knew?"

"No," said Taquisara, thoughtfully. "I never thought of doing that."

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"But what does self-examination mean, then?" asked Gianluca.

"I have not the slightest idea. I am myself. I know myself. I know what I want and do not want. It seems to me that I know enough. What in the world should I examine? You would be much better if you could get rid of all that romance about conscience and self-examination and such trash. A man knows perfectly well whether he is faithful to the woman he loves or not, whether he is betraying his friend or standing by him — what else do you want? I believe that theology and philosophy and self-examination, and all that, were invented in early times for heathen people who did not know whether they were doing right or wrong, because they were just converted."

At this extraordinary view of church history Gianluca laughed.

"You may laugh," answered the Sicilian. "You will never make me believe that old Tancred sat up all night examining his conscience before he went to the Holy Land — any more than he fasted and prayed before he had his daughter's lover murdered."

"No — perhaps not!" Gianluca laughed again.

"He did what struck him as right and natural," said Taquisara, gravely. "Besides, he was sovereign prince in his own land, and it was not a murder at all, but an execution. For a princess, his

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daughter behaved outrageously. I should have done the same thing, in his place. He had the right and the power, and he used it. But that is not the point. As for Ghisleri, he would have cut the boy's head off in a rage, and then he would have spent a year on his knees in a monastery. You would have prayed yourself into a good humour, and the fellow would have got off."

"Unless I had asked your advice," suggested Gianluca.

"And if you had, you would not have acted upon it — any more than you will write to Donna Veronica now, though I tell you that all women like to receive love-letters. It is natural. A woman is not satisfied with being told once a week that she is loved. She likes to know it all the time — the oftener, the better. Two letters of one page are better than one of two pages. Twenty notes a day, of a line or two each, will make a woman perfectly happy — provided that you do not make a mistake and send one less on the day following. They like repetition, provided it is in the same pitch. If you have begun high, you must not let the strings slacken. Women are curious creatures. In religion, they can believe fifty times as much as any man. In love, they only believe while they see you and hear you. As soon as your back is turned — even if they have sent you away — they scream and cry out that you have abandoned them. Before

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you come, they want you. When you are there, you weary them. When you are gone, you have betrayed them. And they wonder that a man cannot bear that sort of thing forever! Do you call me practical for speaking in this way? Very well, then — I am practical. I tell you what I know."

Gianluca was amused, but he thought over what Taquisara had advised him to do, and the more he thought about it, the more inclined he was to follow the advice. Not that he regarded the writing of letters to Veronica at all as a hopeful means of moving her; but he felt that he might write her much which he would not say. He loved her with the deepest sincerity, and with an almost morbid passion, and the idea of approaching her in any way was irresistible. He had not realized before now that he could at least try the experiment of writing. She knew that he loved her, and at the worst, she might tell him not to write again. He remembered his terrible awkwardness and hesitation when he had first told her of his love, and his humiliation afterwards, when he had reflected upon the poor figure he had made. There would be no humiliation, now. He was sure of that. He could rely upon his pen and his wits, though he could not trust to his wits with only his tongue to help them.

The chief objection to this method of wooing was that, in his class, it was untraditional. And this

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had some weight with him, for he had been brought up rigidly in the practices and customs of an exclusive caste. On the other hand, he had never thought of plunging rashly into love-phrases, from the first. He wished to establish a correspondence with Veronica, and then by subtle tact and delicate degrees to acquire the right of speaking to her, by his letters, of what he felt, making no reference to them when he met her, until she should at last give some sign that she would listen favourably.

The plan was wise and far sighted, but it had not been the result of wisdom nor of diplomatic instinct. He adopted it out of delicacy, and out of respect for the woman he loved, and in the hope of reaching her heart without ever jarring upon her sensibilities.

By nature and talent, as well as by cultivation, Gianluca was admirably gifted for such a correspondence as he now attempted to begin. In other circumstances of fortune he might have become eminent as a man of letters. Without possessing any of that practical, masculine knowledge of women, which Taquisara so roughly expressed, Gianluca had a keen and sure understanding of the feminine mind. There is no contradiction in that, for the men who know something of women's hearts by instinct and experience are by no means always those who are in intellectual sympathy with them. Very young women are sometimes surprised

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when they discover this fact, but men generally know it of one another; and the man of whom other men are jealous is rarely the one who prides himself upon knowing and sympathizing with the feminine point of view on things in general, from literature to dress.

Gianluca had talked with Veronica about all sorts of subjects, and she had often asked him questions which he had not been able to answer on the spur of the moment. It was easy for him, in his first letter, to hark back to one of those idle questions of hers, and to make his reply to it an excuse for a letter. Such a communication would need no acknowledgment beyond a spoken word of thanks, which she would bestow upon him the next time they met. It should contain nothing warmer than the assurance of his anxiety to be of service to her, in anything she undertook, and a protestation of respectful friendship at the end.

He wrote that first letter over twice and read it carefully before he sent it. It referred to an historical question connected with the house of Anjou, from which her castle of Muro had come to the Serra by a marriage, several centuries ago, and by which marriage Veronica traced her descent on one side to the kings of France. The castle itself had been twice the scene of royal murders, and there were many strange traditions connected with it. Gianluca got the information he needed from the

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library downstairs, and he found ample material for a letter of some length.

But it was not dry and uninteresting, a mere copy of notes taken from histories and chronicles. The man had an undeveloped literary talent, as has been said, and he instinctively found light and graceful expressions for hard facts. He was himself discovering that he had a gift for writing, and the pleasure of the discovery enhanced the delight of writing to the woman he loved. The man of letters who has first found out his own facility in the course of daily writing to a dearly loved woman alone knows the sort of pleasure that Gianluca enjoyed, when he found that it was his pen that helped him, and not he that was driving his pen.

He sent what he had written, and determined that on the following day he would go to the villa again. To his surprise and joy, he received a note from Veronica in the morning, thanking him warmly for the pains he had taken, and asking another question. It came through the post; and with his insight into feminine ways, he guessed that she had not wished to send a messenger to him, — a servant, who would have at once told other servants of the correspondence.

Veronica had been pleased by the letter. She was beginning to like him for himself, and to forget how very foolish he had seemed to be when he was declaring his passion for her. But his letter

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showed him all at once in an entirely new light, and was at once a pleasure and a surprise. She thought it natural to write him a few words of thanks. Indeed, it would have seemed rude not to do so.

In the liberty she was enjoying in Bianca's house, she was rapidly forgetting that she was only a young girl, and that society would be shocked if it knew that she was exchanging letters with Gianluca della Spina. There is nothing which a girl learns so easily and all at once as independence of that social kind. What grey-haired man of the world has not at one time or another been amazed at the full-grown assurance of some bride of eighteen or nineteen summers? A month is enough — with proper advantages — to make a drawing-room queen and a society tyrant of a schoolgirl. And that sort of independence is not alone the result of marriage. In Veronica's case, a slowly developed strength had been suddenly set free to act, by an accidental emancipation from all semblance of restraint; and the emancipation was so complete that even in the widest interpretation of the law, no one could have now claimed a right to control or direct her actions.

She was nearly twenty-two years of age; she had a great position in her own right, and she was immensely rich. It was not until long afterwards that she learned how many offers of marriage had

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been refused for her by her aunt and uncle. For the present, the fathers and mothers of marriageable sons were waiting until three or four months should have elapsed, for they generally guessed that there had been a catastrophe of some sort at the Palazzo Macomer after Bosio's death; and, moreover, as has been seen, it was impossible to ascertain the proper person to whom to address any such proposal.

The consequence of it all was, that Veronica was absolutely her own mistress, and free to go and come, and to do what seemed right in her own eyes. As she had told the cardinal, when she and society should discover that they needed each other, they would try and agree. In case of a disagreement, it was probable that, of the two, society would yield to Veronica Serra. Meanwhile she would correspond with Gianluca, if she pleased. During the arrangement of her affairs, she had constantly written to men, about business, under the advice of the bankers to whom she had confided the whole matter. Gianluca was merely a few years younger, and happened to belong to her own class. That was all. Why should he and she not write to each other? Yet it was not long since the idea of meeting Gianluca at Bianca's house, by agreement, had seemed a dangerous adventure, about entering upon which she had really hesitated. To-day, for any reasonable cause, she

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would have walked through Naples with him in the face of the world, at the hour when every one was in the streets.

He came to the villa in the afternoon, after receiving her note of thanks, and she was glad to see him, and spoke with pleasure of his letter, before Bianca, who seemed surprised, but said nothing at the time. He was wise enough not to stay too long, and he went away exceedingly elated by his first success.

"What is the matter with him?" asked Veronica, of her friend, just after he had left them. "He seems so much better — but he is growing very lame. Did you notice how he walked to-day? He seems to drag his feet after him."

"He must have hurt his foot," said Bianca, calmly. "By the by, what is this, about letters? Do you mean to say that he writes to you?"

"Yes — and I write to him," answered Veronica, with perfect calm. "You see, as I have nobody to ask, I ask nobody. It is more simple."

"But, my dear child — a young girl —"

"Do not call me a child, and do not call me a young girl, Bianca," said Veronica. "I am neither, in the sense of being a thing to be kept under a glass case and fed on rose leaves. I am a woman, and as I do not think that I shall ever marry, I refuse to be chaperoned all the way to old-maid-hood. I know that you feel responsible for me, in

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a sort of way, because you are married, and I am not. It is really absurd, dear. I am much better able to take care of myself than you are."

"No doubt, in a way. You are more energetic. But as for writing to Gianluca — I hardly know — I wish you would not."

"He writes very well," answered Veronica. "I will show you his letter. Besides, so far as your responsibility goes, it will not last much longer. I shall go to Muro next month."

"Alone?"

"Alone — yes. I always mean to live alone. Don Teodoro will come and dine with me every evening, and we will talk about the people, and what we are doing for them. I shall have horses to ride. If you will come, we will fence together. I shall miss the fencing dreadfully. Could you not come, Bianca dear?"

"I believe that you will miss the fencing more than me, dear," answered Bianca, rather sadly.

Veronica was more to her than she could ever be to Veronica, and she knew it.

"Bianca!" exclaimed the young girl. "How can you say such things! Because I spoke of fencing first? You know that I did not mean it in that way! I want you for yourself — but it will be nice to have the foils in the morning, all the same. You see, I could not even have a fencing-master out there. It is so far! Do come."

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Bianca shook her head.

"We will have glorious days together," continued Veronica. "We will do all sorts of things together. They do say that it rains a good deal in those mountains — well, when it rains, you can write to Signor Ghisleri, while I write to Don Gianluca."

Her innocent laughter at the idea startled Bianca, and the beautiful face grew paler, until it was almost wan. Veronica thought she was like a passion flower, just then. A short silence followed.

"Veronica," said Bianca, at last, "why do you not marry Gianluca, since you have grown to liking him so much?"

"I like him for a friend," answered Veronica, quietly. "I do not want a husband. Some day, I will tell you my story, perhaps — some day, if you will come to Muro, dear. Think about it."

She left the room rather abruptly, and Bianca did not refer to the subject again. She had the power, rare in either of two friends, of not asking questions. Confidence given for the asking, however readily, is but the little silver coin of friendship; the gold is confidence unasked.

In the days that followed, Gianluca wrote to Veronica again and again, about all manner of subjects which had come up in their conversation; and Veronica's short notes of thanks grew longer, until she found that she, too, was beginning to write real letters, and looked forward to writing

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them, as well as to receiving his. And his came oftener, until she had one almost every day.

But when he came, as he did, twice a week, to the villa, they rarely spoke of their correspondence. Somehow it had come to be a bond linking certain sides of their natures which they did not show to each other when they met and talked. They never could talk as freely as they wrote, even upon the most indifferent subjects, though Gianluca seemed perfectly at his ease in conversation. There was a sort of undefined restraint from time to time, together with the certainty that they would write what they really meant, within a day or two, and understand each other far better than by spoken words.

In Gianluca's case such a condition of things was natural enough. He felt that she understood friendship when he meant love, and he was aware that he was progressing slowly but surely towards the freedom to say what was always in his heart, while his success must depend upon his wisdom and tact in not surprising her with a declaration of passion, in the midst of a discussion upon church history or modern systems of charity. Compared with what he had felt in their former relations, he was happy, now, beyond his utmost expectations; and, in the relative happiness he had found, he was willing to be patient, rather than to risk anything prematurely.

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It was more strange, perhaps, that Veronica should regard this growing intimacy as she did, for she had no under-thought of a future change to something else, as he had, and she was naturally simple in reasoning and direct in action. Yet she could not but be aware that there was a sort of duality in their friendship, and she never confused the ideas they exchanged when in the one state — that is to say, when writing — with those about which they talked when an actual meeting brought them into the other. The one state already was an intimacy; the other was hardly yet more than a pleasant acquaintance, with the memory of a disagreeable beginning. Such curiosities of human intercourse are more easily understood by those who have met with them in life than explained to those who have not. The facts were plain. When Veronica and Gianluca were together in Bianca's drawing-room, they said nothing which might not have been heard with indifference by all Naples. When they wrote to each other they spoke of themselves, of their real thoughts about things and people, of their belief, and, to some extent, of their feelings.

Veronica did not perhaps acknowledge that, little by little, Gianluca's letters were beginning to fill the place of poor Bosio's conversation in former times. But that was what was taking place. She was more lonely in mind than in heart, and

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without making the slightest pretence to talent or unusual cultivation, she craved a mental companionship of some sort to take up the thread where it had been broken. She had found it unexpectedly in her new friend's letters, and she recognized it and clung to it, as to something almost necessary in her existence. When she was ready to go up to Muro, she knew that without those letters life in such a solitude would be well nigh unsupportable, whereas, being able to look forward to them, and to answering them, her hours of idleness were already a foretasted pleasure.

She had not even told the cardinal that she was going, and she was going alone. In Naples this seemed so incredible that after she was gone, people spontaneously invented a companion for her and assured one another that she had sent for a distant and elderly old-maid cousin as a chaperon and protectress. Even the cardinal believed it, taking it almost for granted.

On the afternoon of the day before her departure Gianluca came, walking with difficulty and excusing himself for bringing his stick with him into the drawing-room. He was very pale, and looked more ill than for a long time past. But he spoke calmly enough, though saying little more than was required, while Bianca and Veronica kept up the conversation. Veronica was in good spirits and was evidently looking forward to the journey with pleasure and curiosity.

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Then Ghisleri appeared, followed shortly by Taquisara, who had called very rarely during the winter. Veronica thought that he had grown very cold and silent. He slowly stirred a cup of tea which he did not drink, and he scarcely joined in the conversation at all. He looked occasionally at one or another of the party, and once or twice his eyes fixed themselves on Veronica's face. She could not understand why his presence chilled her, but she was aware that she spoke more coldly than usual to Gianluca.

At the end of half an hour, the latter rose to go, glancing at Veronica as he did so. Taquisara, on pretence of setting down his teacup, rose also and managed to place himself in front of Bianca, and said something to which Ghisleri gave an answer, just as Veronica and Gianluca were standing close together.

"May I go on writing to you?" asked Gianluca, in a low tone and quickly.

Veronica looked up at him with a startled expression.

"Oh please — please!" she answered anxiously. "As often as you can — I count on it! Of course!"

Gianluca's thin, pale face brightened suddenly as he heard her vehement request and the anxiety in her tone.

"Thank you," he said. "Good-bye."

He shook hands with Bianca, nodded to the two

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men, and turned away towards the door. He had not reached it, walking a little less painfully in his excitement, when he was aware that he had left his stick leaning against the chair in which he had sat. He stopped and looked back to be sure that it was there, before returning to get it. Veronica was watching him, saw what he had done, picked up the stick and carried it swiftly to him before he could come for it.

Taquisara had seen her movement and had tried to get the stick before she could, to take it to his friend. He had been too far out of reach, and she had been before him. But he followed her, and he saw that as she handed Gianluca his property, she looked up into his face and smiled very kindly. Gianluca thanked her, smiling too, and the impression any one would have had was that they thoroughly understood each other. He bowed again and went out. Veronica turned to come back to the tea-table and found herself facing Taquisara's fiery eyes. She was surprised, and looked into his face, very near to him, and waiting for him to stand aside.

"You are playing with him," he said in a low and angry voice.

The room was long, and Bianca and Ghisleri were at the other end of it. After he had spoken, Veronica stared at him a moment, in genuine amazement at his words and manner. Then her eyes gleamed, too, and the delicate nostrils quivered.

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"You are insolent," she said coldly, and turning a little to the right, she passed him.

"No. I am his friend," he answered, scarcely above a whisper, as she went by.

He came back, shook hands with Bianca, bowed coldly to Veronica, and left the room within two minutes after Gianluca.

"What is the matter with Taquisara?" asked Ghisleri, carelessly. "He seems irritable."

Bianca looked at Veronica.

"Does he? I suppose he is anxious about Don Gianluca."

Veronica was still pale when she spoke, but the tone was cold and indifferent.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

VERONICA had felt herself mortally insulted by Taquisara's manner, much more than by his words, though they had been offensive enough. Her impression of the man was completely changed, in a moment, and she hoped that she might never see him again, so long as she lived. It had been one thing to praise Gianluca to her, and to press his suit for him; it was quite another to lie in wait for her, as it were, at the end of a drawing-room and to reproach her brutally and angrily with wishing to break Gianluca's heart. As she thought of his eyes, and his face, and his low voice, she grew pale with anger herself, at the mere memory of his insolence.

It did not strike her that there could be any truth in his accusation. Gianluca was old enough to take care of himself. Was Taquisara his nurse, his keeper, his doctor? Gianluca was not making love to her in his letters, nor was she, in hers, encouraging him to do so. She was angry at the thought that the Sicilian should know anything of their correspondence, as it seemed evident that he must. It was true that her own friend, Bianca,

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knew something about it. She could forgive Gianluca, if he had confided too much in Taquisara, but she could not forgive Taquisara for having been the recipient of the confidence, and she would neither forgive nor forget the way in which he had shown her how much he knew.

For the first time in her life, Veronica longed to be a man, that she might not only resent the insult, but have satisfaction of the man who had insulted her. She felt that she was emphatically not playing with Gianluca, as Taquisara had expressed it. She had told him frankly, several months earlier, that she could not love him,—she had shaken her head and had said that she was sorry,—and neither he nor any one else had a right to suppose that she was now changing her mind. Since Gianluca was apparently willing to accept the position and to be her friend, it was nobody's affair but his and hers. She felt that she had been fully justified in what she had said to Taquisara. At the same time she was half conscious of being disappointed in the man, and of being wounded by the disappointment.

She left Bianca's house early, and as she drove away to the railway station alone with Elettra, she felt that her life was only now really beginning. The months of independence she had enjoyed had prepared her for this final move. In the course of setting her affairs in order, she had been brought face to face with a side of the world which few

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women ever see or understand, and her character had hardened singularly to meet the difficulties she had found in her path. She probably overestimated the strength she had now acquired; for more than once, on the way to the station, she felt a momentary reaction of timidity and a longing to go back and stay a few days more with Bianca. She laughed bravely at herself for her weakness, and told herself that she was going to her own place, to be surrounded by her own people, that she was two-and-twenty years of age and had been through troubles during the past months which had proved her strength. Nevertheless, the fact remained that she was a very young, unmarried woman, that she was going to live alone, and that she was breaking through the whole hard shell of fossilized social tradition. Even Elettra, born a peasant of the mountains, thought her mistress's decision amazingly bold, though she approved of it in her heart, and had been ready to go to Muro with Veronica long ago.

"What would your father, blessed soul, have said, Excellency?" she asked, when they were seated together in the train which was to take them to Eboli, beyond Salerno.

"Shall I send for the Countess Macomer?" asked Veronica, with a smile.

"Heaven preserve us from her!" exclaimed Elettra, and she crossed herself hastily, and then

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made the sign of the horns with her fingers, against the evil eye, and with her other hand touched a coral charm which she had in her pocket.

Veronica had long been in correspondence with Don Teodoro about the arrangements for her coming. He had expected that she would bring a staff of servants from Naples with all the paraphernalia of a great establishment. She had replied that she intended to employ only her own people, and meant to live very simply. He suggested that she should send a quantity of new furniture, as the apartments in the castle had not been inhabited for nearly twenty years, but Veronica answered that she needed no luxuries, and repeated that she meant to live very simply indeed. She sent her saddle horse and two pairs of strong cobs with two country carriages and a coachman — a very young man, who had served in Gianluca's regiment and had been his man. He was to find a man in Muro to help him in the stables, and he was the only servant, not a native, whom she meant to employ. Don Teodoro had kept ten people at work for a month in cleaning the vast old place. Veronica had sent also a box of books, some linen and silver, and her fencing things — for she still hoped that Bianca would pay her a visit.

The journey by rail occupied between four and five hours, but it did not seem so long to her. She was surprised at the excitement she felt, as she

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passed station after station and watched the changing sights and the mountains that loomed up in the foreground, while those behind her dwindled in the distance. She had travelled very little in her life, since she had come back from Rome.

On the platform of the little station at Eboli, Don Teodoro was waiting for her. His tall bent figure and enormous nose made him conspicuous at a distance, and she could see the big silver spectacles anxiously searching for her along the row of carriage windows. As the door was opened for her she waved her handkerchief to the old priest, with a little gesture of happy enthusiasm, high above her head, and he saw her immediately and came forward, three-cornered hat in hand. She suddenly loved the smile with which he greeted her.

"You, at least, do not think that I am mad to come to Muro, do you?" she asked, standing beside him on the platform while Elettra was handing out her smaller belongings.

"Not at all," answered the old man. "You are coming to take care of your own people, and it is a good deed. Good deeds generally seem eccentric to society — and considering their rarity, that is not extraordinary."

He smiled again, and Veronica laughed.

"Your carriage is here," said Don Teodoro. "May I take you to it? Will you give me the tickets, Elettra? They take them at the gate."

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Veronica felt a new thrill of joyous freedom and independence, as for the first time in her life she set her little foot upon the step of her own carriage, and glanced at the simple, well-appointed turnout. The coachman sat alone in the middle of the box, a broad-shouldered, clean-shaven young fellow of six-and-twenty, in a dull green livery with white facings — the colours of the Serra.

"You would not even have a footman," observed Don Teodoro.

"No — not I!" she laughed, still standing in the carriage. "How are the horses doing, Giovanni?" she asked of the coachman. "Are they strong enough for the work?"

"They are good horses, Excellency," the man answered. "They need work."

"And how is Sultana?" inquired the young girl, who had not seen the mare for several days.

"The mare is well, Excellency."

Veronica made Don Teodoro sit beside her, and Elettra installed herself opposite them, with her mistress's bags and other things. The luggage was piled on a cart which was to follow, and they drove away.

"I sent the carriage down yesterday," observed Don Teodoro. "I came by the coach this morning."

"Is it so far?" asked Veronica, whose ideas about the position of her property were still uncertain,

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for it had never struck Elettra that her mistress did not know how far it was from Eboli to Muro.

"It is over thirty miles," answered the priest, with a smile. "We are beyond civilization in Muro — we are in the province of Basilicata. But there are little towns on the way, and you must stop to rest the horses and to eat something. It will be almost dark when you get home."

"Home!" repeated Veronica, thoughtfully.

A confused vision rose in her mind, of an imaginary room, looking down from a height upon a town below — a room in which she would live altogether, with her books and her favourite objects and the companionship of her favourite ideas and plans, all of which were to be realized and executed in the course of time. She fancied herself gazing down from the wide window upon what was almost all hers, upon the dwellings of people who lived upon her land, who pastured her flocks and drove her cattle, living, moving, and having being as integral animate parts of her great inheritance; children of men and women whose fathers' fathers had laboured in old days that she might have and enjoy the fruits of so much toil, who had given much and from whom had often been taken even that which they had not been bound fairly to give; who had received nothing in return for generations of blood and bone worn out, dried up, and consumed to dust in the service of the great house of Serra. They

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had a right to her, as she had a right to the lands on which they lived. There was much talk of rights, Veronica thought, nowadays, and those who had none were privileged to speak the loudest and to be heard first. But those who, having right on their side, were blinded and smitten dumb by the enormous despotism of their self-styled betters — by the glare and noise of blatant power in possession — they were the ones who really had rights, and if she could give any of them a single hundredth part of what was their due, she should be glad that she had lived. Wealth, she thought, should not be an accumulation, but a distribution, of goods. Charity should no longer mean alms, nor should poverty be pauperism. In the young, whole-hearted simplicity of her desire to do good, it seemed likely that she might soon be a specimen of the strangest of all modern anomalies — the princely socialist. It was certainly in her power to try almost any experiment which suggested itself, and on a scale which might ultimately prove something to herself and others.

It was not that she meant to study political economy, or socialism, nor to give the name of an experiment to anything she did. She had been struck by the practical necessity for doing something, when Don Teodoro had first written to her about the condition of the people in Muro, and her own observations made on her farms in the Falernian

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district — one of the richest corners of vine land in all Italy — had convinced her that some sort of action was urgently necessary. And if, in the midst of such riches, the Falernian peasants were half starved, what must be the state of the people on her lands in the Basilicata? Don Teodoro had drawn her an accurate picture, full of those plain details which carry more than the weight of their mere words. Something should be done at once. She had given him power and money to help the very poorest, before she came; but her common sense told her that the evil lay too deep in the soil to be reached by a light shower of silver — or even by a storm of gold rain.

Inventors, great or small, are rarely theorists; the invention must be suited to the necessity, before all things, and the theory may come afterwards if anybody cares for it. For a theory is nothing but an attempted explanation, and the fact must exist before it can possibly need explaining. Bread is a great invention against hunger, and a man needs to know nothing about the gastric juices to save himself from starvation when the loaf is in his hand. Veronica meant to put the loaves where they were needed, within reach of those who needed them.

As she was driven through the rugged country on that May afternoon, she felt that she had a future before her, that she was going into action,

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and leaving stagnation behind, and that her own life, which was to be her very own, was just beginning. It was to be a life quite different from the existence of any one she knew, for, unlike the lives of her friends, hers was to have an integral, independent existence of its own, with one determined object for all its activity.

The months she had passed in Bianca's house had rather strengthened than weakened the unformulated resolution which she had first vaguely reached in the dark days after Bosio's death. There had been much solitude, and many rides and drives into the country with her beautiful, silent friend; and there had been very little contact with the world to disturb the onward current of her thoughts. More than all, the first breath of liberty after long restraint had enlarged and widened her determination to be always free, in spite of the world, and society, and the drone of the busy-bodies' gossip. In her heart, the memory of Bosio had grown in dignity, till it was solemn and imposing out of all proportion with what the man himself had been, even as Veronica had known him. To know the truth of what his real life had been would have shaken her own to its foundations. But there was no fear of that; and now, her chief companion was to be the priest who had loved him as a friend. Possibly that last fact had even influenced her a little in her final determination

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to live at Muro, rather than in any other of four or five equally habitable or uninhabitable places which she owned, and where she might have begun her work under circumstances quite as favourable to success.

She had thought very little of any need she might feel for relaxation and amusement, and she was very far from realizing what that solitude meant, which she was seeking with so much enthusiasm. She had never yet been as much alone as she should have liked to be, and she could not imagine that she might possibly become tired of playing the princess in the tower for months together, with only the company of one learned old ecclesiastic as her sole diversion. The vision of home which she evoked was always the same, but she did not even know whether the castle had a room which looked down upon the little town. She imagined but a single room; the rest was all a blank. She had been told that it was a great old fortress, with towers and halls and courts, gloomy, grand, and haunted by the ghosts of murdered kings and queens; but the slight descriptions she had heard produced no prevision of the reality as compared with what she really wanted and was sure that she should find.

She thought of Gianluca, as the carriage rolled along through the lower hills, and she looked forward with pleasure to writing about what she saw

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and expected to see. It seemed probable that she would write even longer letters to him, now that she was to be quite alone, and she hoped that his would be as interesting as ever. She thought again with anger of Taquisara's extraordinary conduct, for she was positively sure that she was not playing with his friend in any sense of the word. The very suggestion would have been insulting, if he had made it in the most carefully guarded and tactful language. As he had put it, it had been nothing short of outrageous.

Gianluca must be blind indeed, she assured herself, if he fancied that she meant more than friendship by the constant exchange of letters with him. It might be eccentric ; it might be looked upon as utterly and unpardonably unconventional, but it could never be regarded as a flirtation by letter. The proof of that, Veronica argued to herself, was that both of them knew that it was nothing of the sort, a manner of begging the question familiar to those who wish to do as they please without hindrance from within or without.

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CHAPTER XIX.

THE roads were good, for it was the month of May. In winter, even Veronica's strong horses could hardly have dragged the light carriage to its destination in one day. It was but little after ten o'clock in the morning when Veronica got out upon the platform of the railway station at Eboli; it was sunset, and the full moon was rising, when her carriage stopped at the entrance of the mountain town.

It had been a very long day, and she had seen much that was quite new to her, and different from what she had expected. At first, indeed, she was amazed at the richness of the country beyond Eboli, as she was driven for nearly an hour through what was literally a forest of ancient olive trees, interrupted only here and there by a broad field of vines, cut low and trained upon short stakes; and from the rising ground beyond Carpella, where the road winds up the first hill, she looked back and saw the shimmering grey-green light of the olive leaves, lying like a delicate mantle over the flat country and in the great hollow, from Eboli to the deep gorge wherein the

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ancient city of Campania lies as in a nest. A part of the olive land was hers; and as she drove along, the midday breeze blew some of the tiny, star-like olive blossoms into her lap. She took one in her fingers and looked at it closely and could just smell its very faint, aromatic odour.

"It is the first greeting from what is yours," said Don Teodoro, with a smile.

"The wind brings me my own flowers," answered Veronica, and she laughed softly and happily.

Up steep hills and down into deep valleys, across high, arched stone bridges, beneath which the water of the Sele was streaming fast and clear amid white limestone boulders and over broad reaches of white pebbles that were dazzling in the sun — and the olive trees were left behind, and here and there were patches of big timber, oaks to which the old, brown leaves still clung in the spring, and many poplars straight and feathery with leaves but yet half grown. But the land was by degrees less rich and less cultivated, till gradually it changed to a rough and stony country, and even from far off Veronica could see the little flocks of sheep dark brown and white, and small herds of cloud-grey cattle, pasturing and moving slowly on the hillsides above and below the winding road.

She looked at the shepherds when they were near enough for her to see them. As she had left

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Eboli, she had seen one, driving a flock of sheep along the high road, and she had wondered whether there were many of his kind. He was a magnificently handsome young fellow of two or three and twenty, dressed in loose brown velveteens, with a belted jacket and a spotless shirt, strong, well-made shoes, leathern gaiters, and a flat cap, and he carried the traditional hatchet of the southern shepherd. He strode along with a light and easy gait, and looked more like a young gentleman in a rather eccentric but well-made shooting-dress, than like a herdsman. But he was from Eboli itself, and a native would have told her that the people of Eboli were "exceedingly fanatic about dress." The men and the clothes she now saw were very different; tall, grim figures in vast and often ragged brown cloaks that reached almost to their feet; small, battered, pointed hats; rough, muddy hose that should have once been white; shoes that loaded their steps like lead; and they moved slowly, with bent heads, rough, long-unshaven faces, eyes too hollow, horny hands too lean — wild, half-fed creatures, worse off than the flocks they drove, by all the degrees of the inverse ratio between man, who needs man's help, and beast, that needs only nature.

There was that same grimness — there is no other word — in the faces of almost all the people Veronica now met, as the road wound higher and

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then descended through Oliveto, the first of the mountain villages. There was in them all the look of men and women who know that the struggle is hopeless, but who will not, or cannot, die and be at rest. There was the expression of those who will no longer make any effort except for the bare, hard bread that keeps them above ground, and who, having toiled through the terrible daylight that is their cruel task-master, lie down as they are, when work is done, to forget daylight and life if they can, in a mercifully heavy sleep. But before their bones are half rested, the pitiless day is upon them, and drives them out to labour again till they are stupid with weariness and only not faint enough to faint and forget.

The people sometimes stood still and stared at the young princess as she drove by, with the old priest beside her. But the majority went on, indifferent and far beyond anything like interest or curiosity. Only the shepherds' great cur dogs, of all breeds and colours, but always big and fierce, barked furiously at the carriage and plunged furiously after it, pulling up suddenly and turning back with a growl when they had followed it for half a minute. The women, in ragged black or dark, checked skirts, with torn red woollen shawls hanging from their heads, glanced sidelong at Veronica, when they were still young; but the older ones went by without giving her a

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look, their leathern, Sibylline faces set, their old lids wrinkled by everlasting effort till they almost hid the small dark eyes. The most of them carried something in their hands, — faggots, covered baskets, small sacks of potatoes, or corn, or beans; and when the load was heavy they walked with a sharp, jerking turn of the hips to right and left that was almost like a dislocation, and the wrinkles in the faces of these heavy-laden ones were deep folds, as in the hide of a loose-skinned beast. For in that country to be strong is to be cursed; it means double work and double burden, where everything that breathes and moves and can be found to labour is driven to the very breaking point of strain.

But as Veronica drove on, there were fewer men and women in the road, and only once in an hour or so, a huge cart, piled up with wine barrels, lumbered along, drawn by four or five deathly-looking mules that stumbled when they had to stop or start — shadowy creatures, the ghosts of their kind, as it were.

The villages were worse than the open country, for in them the appalling poverty was gathered together in its muddiest colours and set in fixed pictures which Veronica never forgot. In the May weather, the doors of low dwellings were open, and the black and white pigs wandered unhindered from the filthy street without to the

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misery within, fattening on the poor waste of the desperately poor, fattening in the sun that drove their wretched betters to the daily fight with starvation, fattening in the vile filth to which starvation was dully indifferent, since cleanliness meant labour that brought no bread.

To the right and left the barren mountains reared their enormous baldness to the sun, deserts raised up broadside, as it were, and set on end, that their bareness might be the better seen and known to the world around. Here and there, from their bases, dark wooded spurs ran out across the rising valley, and the road wound round them, in and out, and up and down, and over stone bridges big and little, and then up in terribly steep ascent, southeastwards to high Laviano, looking towards the pass by which the highway leads from Ciliento to Basilicata.

In Laviano, facing the wretched houses, stood the grand beginning of a wretchedly unfinished building, one of those utter failures of great hopes, which trace the track of invading liberty through the south. It came, it saw, and it began many things — but it did not conquer and it completed very little. In the first wild enthusiasm of the Garibaldian revolution, even poor, hill-perched, filth-stricken, pig-breeding Laviano was to be a city, and forthwith, in the general stye, the walls of a great municipal building, from which lofty

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destinies were to be guided and controlled in the path to greatness, began to rise, with strength of stone masonry, and arches of well-hewn basalt, and divisions within for halls and stairways, and many offices. But the beams of the first story were never laid across the lower walls. There was no more money, and what had been built was a palace for the pigs. Laviano had spent its little all, and gone into debt, to be great, and had failed; and though the people had earned some of their own money back as wages in the building, more than half of it slipped into the pockets of architects, who went away smiling, jeering, and happy, to prey upon the next foolish village that would be great and could not. And above, from a hill on the mountain's spur outside the village, still frowned intact the heavy four-towered castle, complete and sound as when it had been built, the lasting monument of those hard warriors of a sterner time, who could not only take, but hold — and they held long and cruelly.

Veronica looked up backwards at the towers, as the horses stood a while to breathe after the steep ascent, and she asked Don Teodoro to whom the castle belonged.

"It is yours," he answered. "The castle is yours, the village is yours, the hills are yours. Your steward lives in the castle. You have much property here, more miles of good and bad land than I can tell."

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"And is it all like this? Are the people all like these?"

"No. There are poorer people in the hills."

The happy laugh that had come when the wind had blown the olive blossoms of Eboli upon her lap had long been silent now. Her face was grave and sorrowful, and she drew in her lips as though something hurt her. Some half-naked children stood shyly watching her from a little distance. Pigs grunted and rubbed themselves against the wheels of the carriage, and the coachman lashed backwards at them with his whip. But the cruel day was not yet over, and the people had not come back from their toil, so that the place was almost deserted still. There was an evil smell in the air, and the children's faces were pale and swollen and dirty.

Veronica wondered how any people could be poorer than these, and her face grew still more sad. She tried to speak to the children, but they could not understand her. She got some little coins from her purse, but they were too much frightened to come forward and take them. They were not afraid of the priest, however, and Don Teodoro got out of the carriage and put the money into their horrible little hands, and they ran away with strange small cries and wild, half-noiseless laughter — if laughter can be anything but noisy. Let such words pass as come; for no words of our

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tongue can quite tell all Veronica saw and heard on that day. The great Italian myth survives in foreign nations; it has even more life, perhaps, in Italy itself, north of the Roman line; but only those know what Italy is, who have trudged on foot, and ridden by mountain paths, and driven by southern highways, through hill and valley and mountain and plain, from house to house, where there are neither inns nor taverns, throughout that vast region which is the half of the whole country, or more, and where the abomination of desolation reigns supreme in broad day.

That Italy has done what she has done in thirty years, to be a power among nations, is a marvel, a wonder, and almost a miracle. That she should have done it at all, is the greatest mistake ever committed by a civilized nation, and it is irrevocable, as its results are to be fatal and lasting. But upon the good reality of unity, the deadly dream of military greatness descended as a killing blight, and the evil vision of political power has blasted the common sense of a whole people. It is one thing to be one, as a united family, each working for the good of each and all; it is another thing, and a worse thing, to be one as a vast and idle army, sitting down to besiege its own storehouses, each eating something of the whole and doing nothing to increase that whole, till all is gone, and the vision fades in the awakening

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from the dream, leaving the bare nakedness of desolation to tell the story of a huge mistake.

Even Veronica's strong horses were well nigh tired out when they reached the dismal solitude of the high pass above Laviano; and she herself was wearied and faint with the gloom, and the poverty, and the barrenness of so much that was hers. But her mouth was set and firm, and she meant that something should be done before many days, which should begin a vast and lasting change. She did not know what she was undertaking, nor how far she might be led in the attempt to do good against great odds of evil on all sides; but she was not discouraged, and she had no intention of drawing back.

It was a very long day. As the hours wore on, the three ate something from time to time, from a basket of provisions which Elettra had brought, and at which Veronica had laughed. But the air of the mountains was keen, and there was not too much in the basket, after all.

Then, in the shadow below the sun-line cut by the mountains across the earth, she saw a sharp peak, grey and regular as a pyramid, rising in the midst of the high valley, and then beyond it, as the carriage rolled along, there was a misty landscape of a far, low valley — and then, all at once, the brown, tiled roofs of her own Muro were at her feet, and far to the left, out of the houses, rose

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the round grey keep of the fortress. The setting sun was behind the mountains, and the moon, near to the full, hung, round and white, just above the tower, in the pale eastern sky. From the second turning of the steep descent, Veronica could see a huge bastion of the castle above the roofs, jutting out like an independent round fort.

Many of the people knew that she was coming, and some had hastened from their work to see her as soon as she arrived. Curious, silent, pale, dirty, they thronged about the carriage. An old woman touched Veronica's skirt, and then brought her hand back to her lips and kissed it. Then another did the same — a thin, dark-browed girl with a ragged red shawl on her head. The uncouth men stood shoulder to shoulder, staring with unwinking eyes. A tall, pale shepherd youth was erect and motionless in a tattered hat and a brown cloak, overtopping the others by his head and thin throat, and there was something Sphinx-like in the expression of his still, sad face.

On Veronica's right, as the carriage halted, was the public fountain. Twenty or thirty tall, thin girls in short black frocks, displaying grimy stockings and coarse shoes, or bare legs and muddy red feet, were waiting their turns to fill the long wooden casks they carried on their heads. The fountain had but two little streams of water, and it took a long time to fill a cask. At the sound of the car-

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riage wheels, most of the girls turned slowly round to see the sight, their empty barrels balanced crosswise on their heads. They did not even lift a hand to steady their burdens as they changed their positions. They stared steadily. Veronica looked to the right and left and tried to smile, to show that she was pleased. But the visible, jagged edges of their outward misery cut cruelly at her heart, for they were her people; nominally, by old feudal right, they were all her people, and her father's father had held right of justice and of life and death over them all; and in actual fact they were almost all her people, since they lived in her houses, worked on her lands, and ate a portion of her bread, though it was such a very little one as could barely keep them alive.

She tried to smile, and some of the girls held out their fingers towards her and then kissed them, as though they had touched her dress, as the old woman had done. But the men stared stolidly from under the low brims of their battered hats. Only the fever-struck shepherd smiled in a sickly way and lost his Sphinx-like look all at once.

A man in a white shirt came forward, leading Veronica's mare, all saddled for her to mount.

"The carriage cannot go through the streets," said Don Teodoro, in explanation. "They are too narrow and too rough."

"No," answered Veronica, as she stepped from

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the carriage upon the muddy stones. "I will walk. If the streets are good enough for my people, they are good enough for me."

Even to the good priest this seemed a little exaggeration on her part. But she had seen much that day of which she had never dreamed, and in her generous heart there was a sort of fierce wrath against so much misery, with a strong impulse to share it or cure it, to face the devil on his own ground, and beat him to death, hand to hand. It was perhaps foolish of her to walk to her own gate, but there was nothing to be ashamed of in the feeling which prompted her to do it.

Don Teodoro walked beside her on the left, and Elettra pressed close to her on the right, as they threaded the foul black lanes towards the castle. The moment she had left the carriage, men and women and children had seized eagerly upon her belongings, to carry the bags and rugs and little packages, and now they followed her in a compact crowd, all talking together in harsh undertones; and from the dark doorways, as she went by, old women and old men came out, and more children, half clothed in rags, and cripples four or five. The pigs that were out in the lanes were caught in the press and struggled desperately to get out of it, upsetting even strong men with their heavy bodies as they charged through the crowd, grunting and squealing. A few people coming from the opposite

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direction, too, flattened themselves against the black walls and low, greasy doors, but there was not room even there, and they also were taken up by the throng and driven before, till the small crowd grew to a little multitude of miserable, curious, hungry, scrambling humanity, squeezing along the narrow way to get sight of the lady before she should reach the castle gate.

From time to time the tall old priest turned mildly and protested, trying to get more air and elbow room for Veronica.

"Gently, gently, my children!" he called to them. "You will see your princess often, for she is come to stay with you."

"Eh, uncle priest!" cried a rough young voice. "That is fair and good, but who believes it?"

"Eh, who believes it?" echoed a dozen voices, young and old.

Veronica laid her hand upon Don Teodoro's arm to steady herself as she trod upon the slimy stones. She could not have stopped, for the crowd, extending far behind her in the dim street, would have pushed her down, but she turned her head as she walked and spoke in the direction of the people. Her voice rang high and clear over their heads.

"I have come to live with you," she said, and they heard her even far off. "It is true. You shall see."

"God render it you!" said a woman's voice. "May God make it true!"

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"More than one of them are saying that to themselves," observed Don Teodoro, as Veronica looked before her again, and walked on.

Suddenly she came out upon a broader, cleaner way, which led out beyond the houses and up, by a sweep, to the low gate of the castle; close before her was the great lower bastion which she had seen from a distance. She saw now that there was a trellis high up, all over it, on which grew a vine; but the leaves were scarcely budding yet. She had not time to see much, for the crowd would not let her stop, and as the way widened, many ran before her, up to the gate, where they stopped short, for there were half a dozen men there in dark green coats, and silver buttons, foresters of the estate, who kept them back.

Veronica would have turned once more, to nod to the people and smile at the poor women who pressed close upon her, but the crowd was so great that as the foresters made way for her, she found herself driven almost violently into her own gate, and in the rush, Elettra nearly fell to her knees as they got in. The gate clanged behind her, and she heard the great bolts sliding into their sockets, as it was made fast. Her men had known well enough what to expect from the curiosity of the people. They opened a little postern and let in the few who carried her things, and who had been shut out with the crowd.

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She drew a long breath and looked upward, before her. It was very unlike what she had expected. She was in the dark, vaulted way, scarcely eight feet broad, and paved with flagstones, which led up to the first small court. The masonry was rough, enormous, damp, and blackened with dampness and age. From the building around the little enclosure small, dark windows looked down upon her. A narrow door was on her right. On the left, rough stone steps led up to the keep, and to the eastern side of the castle. The door stood open, and there was a lamp in the small entry. Before entering, she glanced up at the lintel and saw that the ancient arms of the Serra were roughly sculptured in the old marble, and she knew that she was on the threshold of her home.

It was more like a gloomy dungeon than the princely castle of which she had dreamed. That, indeed, was what it had been through many ages, and nothing else. She wondered where the great staircase could be where the poor ghost of Queen Joanna sat and shrieked at midnight on the twelfth of May. It was near the day, and not being at all timid, she smiled at the thought, as she went in. Three or four decently clad women in black came forward into the vaulted passage, and smiled and nodded awkwardly. They were the people Don Teodoro had engaged for her service. She had a word for each and patted them on the shoulder,

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and they led the way, two and two, carrying a light between them, for it was very dark within, though there was still broad daylight without.

Then, all at once, she scarcely knew how, Veronica was standing upon a little balcony. Behind her, the walls of the embrasure were fully fifteen feet thick. Before her, under the glow of the sunset on the one hand, and the first pale moonlight on the other, lay a great valley, deep and long and broadening fan-like from below her to the far distance, where the evening mists were beginning to gather the white light of the moon, while the great mountains of the southeast were still red with the last blood of the dying day — a view of matchless peace and surpassing beauty, such as she had never yet seen. Just then, she looked down, and there, at her feet, were the brown roofs of Muro. Her dream seemed to be suddenly realized, and she had found the room of which she had so often made the picture in her imagination. But it was far more beautiful than she had dared to imagine or dream. The lofty fortress was built lengthwise along the rock, facing the southwest, to meet the winter sun from morning till night; and forever before it lay the wide Basilicata, the peace of the valley, the height of the huge mountains, the infinite tenderness of a distance that is seen from a vast height — in which even what would be near in one plane, is already far by depth.

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Veronica looked out in silence for a long time, and the day faded at last in the sky, while the moon's light whitened and strewed blackness across the twilight shadows. The old priest stood beside her, his three-cornered hat in his hand. But the silver spectacles had disappeared. He could feel what was before him without seeing it distinctly.

"I knew that I should find it," said Veronica, at last. "I always knew that it was here. I shall live in this room."

"It is a good room," said Don Teodoro, quietly, and not at all understanding what she meant.

"And I have an idea that I shall die in this room," added the young girl, in a dreamy tone, not caring whether he heard or not. "I am the last of them, you know. They all came from here in the beginning, ever so long ago. It would be natural that the last of them should die here."

"For Heaven's sake, let us not talk of such sad things!" cried the priest, protesting against the mere mention of death, as almost every Italian will.

"Have they made it a sitting-room?" asked Veronica, turning from the balcony into the deep embrasure.

She had scarcely glanced at the furniture, for she had made straight for the window on entering. She looked about her now. There were dark tapestries on the walls. There was a big polished table in the middle, and a dozen or more carved chairs,

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covered with faded brocade, were arranged in regular order on the three sides away from the windows. The high vault was roughly painted in fresco, with cherubs and garlands of flowers in the barbarous manner of Italian art fifty years ago. There was a low marble mantelpiece, and on it stood six brass candlesticks at precisely even distances, one from another, the six candles being all lighted. But there was a lamp on the table. Veronica smiled.

"You must forgive me if I have not known what to do," said Don Teodoro, humbly, but smiling also. "I have seen something of civilization in my wanderings, but I never attempted to arrange a house before. This is a very large house, if one calls such a place a house at all."

"I suppose there are thirty or forty rooms?"

"There are three hundred and sixty-five altogether," answered the priest, his smile broadening. "They are all named in the inventory. There is a legend about the place to the effect that there is a three hundred and sixty-sixth, which no one can find. Of course the inventory includes every roofed space between walls, from the dungeon at the top of the keep to the dark room under the trap-door in the last hall on this lower story. But you will be surprised, to-morrow, if you go over the place. It is much bigger than seems possible, because you can never really see it from outside unless you go down into the plain."

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"And where do you think that other room is?" asked Veronica, who was young enough to take interest in the mystery.

"Heaven knows! Perhaps it does not exist at all. But as I was saying, my dear princess, I found it hard to arrange an apartment for you, not knowing how you might choose to select your quarters. So I had the tapestries cleaned and hung up, and the chairs dusted and the tables polished, and some lights got ready on this floor, and your bedroom is the last."

"The one with the trap-door?" asked Veronica. "That is very amusing!"

"I had the dark room below well cleaned, and the trap has been screwed down," said Don Teodoro. "I thought that there might be rats there. Elettra has the room before yours. But you are tired, and you must be hungry. It is my fault for not leaving you at once."

"But you will dine with me? To-night and every night, Don Teodoro — that is understood."

Half an hour later, they sat down to table in the light of the lamp and the six candles, in the room from which Veronica had looked out upon the valley. But they were both too tired to talk, though they made faint attempts at conversation, and as soon as the meal was over, the old priest begged leave to go home.

"Do not be afraid," he said, as he bade Veronica

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good night. "There are several men in the house. You are not all alone with your five women. The foresters have their headquarters here."

Veronica was anything but timid or nervous, but when she was in bed in her own room at the south corner of the castle, watching the shadows cast up by the flickering night light upon the ancient tapestries, she realized that she was very lonely indeed, she and scarcely a dozen servants, in the vast fortress wherein a thousand men had once found ample room to live. Brave as she was, she glanced once or twice at the corner of the room where the trap-door was placed. There was a carpet over it, and a table stood there which Elettra had arranged hastily for the toilet table. Veronica wondered what end that dark place below had served in ancient days, and whether she were not perhaps lying in the very room in which Queen Joanna had been smothered by the two Hungarian soldiers. It seemed probable.

But she was very tired, and she fell asleep before long, fancying that she was looking out from the balcony again, with the brown roofs of her people's houses at her feet.

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CHAPTER XX.

VERONICA was awake early in the May morning, and looked out again upon the great valley she had seen at sunset. It was all mist and light, without distinct outline. A fresh breeze blew into her face as she stood at the open window, and the sun was yet on the southeast wall, so that she stood in the clear, bluish shadow which high buildings cast only in the morning.

She had slept soundly without dreams, and she wondered how she could have ever glanced last night towards the place in the corner where the trap-door was hidden under her toilet table, or how she could have felt herself lonely and not quite safe, in her own castle, with a dozen of her own people, when she had never been afraid in the Palazzo Macomer. She pushed back her brown hair, a little impatiently, and laughed as she turned to Elettra.

"We are well here, Excellency," said the maid, with a smile of satisfaction.

She rarely spoke unless Veronica addressed her, and was never a woman of many words.

"And you saw no ghosts?" Veronica laughed.

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"I am afraid of ghosts that wear felt slippers," answered Elettra.

An hour later Veronica sent for Don Teodoro, and they went over the castle together. He led her first to the high dungeon on the north side. The natural rock sprang up at that end, and some of the steps were cut in it. At the top, the tower was round, with a high parapet, and an extension on one side, all filled with earth and planted with cabbages and other green things.

"The under-steward had a little vegetable garden here," said Don Teodoro. "I suppose that you will plant flowers. Will you look over the parapet on that side?"

Veronica trod the soft earth daintily and reached the wall. She glanced over it, and then drew a deep breath of surprise. Below her was a sheer fall of a thousand feet, to the bottom of a desolate ravine that ran up to northward in an incredibly steep ascent.

Then they went into the ancient prison, which was a round, vaulted chamber, shaped like the inside of the sharp end of an eggshell, with one small grated window, three times a man's height from the stone floor. The little iron door had huge bolts and locks, and might have been four or five hundred years old. On the stone walls, men who had been imprisoned there had chipped out little crosses, and made initials, and rough dates in the

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fruitless attempts to commemorate their obscure suffering.

Veronica and Don Teodoro descended again, and he led her through many strange places, dimly lighted by small windows piercing ten feet of masonry, and through the enormous hall which had been the guard-room or barrack in old days, and had served as a granary since then, and up and down dark stairs, through narrow ways, out upon jutting bastions, down and up, backwards and forwards, as it seemed to her, till she could only guess at the direction in which she was going, by the glimpses of distant mountain and valley as she passed the irregularly placed windows. Several of her people followed her, and one went before with a huge bunch of ancient keys, opening and shutting all manner of big and little doors before her and after her. Now and then one of the men in green coats lighted a lantern and showed her where steep black steps led down into dark cellars, and vaults, and underground places.

She saw it all, but she was glad to get back to the room she already loved best, from which the balcony outside the windows looked down upon the valley.

And there she began at once to install herself, causing her books to be unpacked and arranged, as well as the few objects familiar to her eyes, which she had brought with her. Among these was the

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photograph of Bosio Macomer. Those of Gregorio and Matilde had disappeared. She hesitated, as she held the picture in her hand, as to whether she should keep it in her bedroom, or in the sitting-room, in which she meant chiefly to live, and she looked at it with sad eyes. She decided that it should be in the sitting-room. Where everything was hers, she had a right to show what had been all but quite hers at the last. The six brass candlesticks were taken away, and Bosio's photograph was set upon the long, low mantelpiece. His death had after all been more a surprise, a horror, a disappointment, than the wound it might have been if she had really loved him, and it is only the wound that leaves a scar. The momentary shock is presently forgotten when the young nerves are rested and the vision of a great moment fades to the half-tone of the general past. Between her present, too, and the night of Bosio's death, had come the attempt upon her own life, and all the sudden change that had followed the catastrophe. She was too brave to realize, even now, that she might have died at Matilde's hands. She had to go over the facts to make herself believe that she had been almost killed. But the whole affair had brought a revolution into her life, since Bosio had been gone.

Another companionship had taken the place of his, so that she hardly missed him now. She would miss Gianluca's letters far more than Bosio, if they

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should suddenly stop, and the mere thought that the correspondence might be broken off gave her a sharp little pain. The idea crossed her mind while she was arranging her writing-table near her favourite window, for all writing seemed to be connected with Gianluca, so that she could not imagine passing more than a day or two without setting down something on paper which he was to read, and to answer. To lose that close intimacy of thought would be to lose much.

But Gianluca had written on the morning of her departure, and before Veronica had half finished what she was doing, one of her women brought her his letter, for the post came in at about midday. It came alone, for Bianca had not written yet, and Veronica's correspondence was not large. She had not even thought of ordering a newspaper to be sent to her. Her work and occupation were to be in Muro, and she cared very little about what might happen anywhere else. She broke the seal and read the letter eagerly.

It was like most of his letters at first, being full of matters about which he had talked with her, and written in the graceful way which was especially his and which had so much charm for her. But towards the end his courage must have failed him a little, for there were sad words and one or two phrases that had in them something touching and tender to which she was not accustomed. He did

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not tell her that he was ill and that he feared lest he might never see her again, for he was far too careful as yet of hinting at the truth she would not understand. They were very little things that told her of his sadness — an unfinished sentence ending in a dash, the fall of half a dozen harmonious words that were like a beautiful verse and vaguely reminded her of Leopardi's poetry — small touches here and there which had either never slipped from his pen before, or which she had never noticed.

They pleased her. She would not have been a human woman if she had not been a little glad to be missed for herself, even though the writing was to continue. She read the last part of the letter over three times, the rest only twice, and then she laid it in an empty drawer of her table, rather tenderly, to be the first of many. That should be Gianluca's especial place.

Amidst her first arrangements for her own comfort, she did not forget what she looked upon as her chief work, and before that day was over she had begun what was to be a systematic improvement of Muro. Direct and practical, with a sense beyond her years, she did not hesitate. The first step was to clean the little town and pave the streets. The next to visit and examine the dwellings.

"The place shall be clean," said Veronica to the steward, who stood before her table, receiving her orders.

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"But, Excellency, how can it be clean when there are pigs everywhere?" inquired the man, astonished at her audacity.

"There shall be no more pigs in Muro," answered the young princess. "The people shall choose as many trustworthy old men and boys as are necessary to look after the creatures. They shall be kept at night in some barn or old building a mile or two from here, and they shall be fed there, or pastured there. I will pay what it costs."

"Excellency, it is impossible! There will be a revolution!" The steward held up his hands in amazement.

"Very well, then. Let us have a revolution. But do not tell me that what I order is impossible. I will have no impossibilities. The town belongs to me, and it shall be inhabited by human beings, and not by pigs. If you make difficulties, you may go. I can find people to carry out my orders. Begin and clean the streets to-day. Take as many hands as you need and pay them full labourer's wages, but see that they work. Make a list of the pigs and their owners. Decide where you will keep them. Hire the swineherds. If I find one pig in Muro a week from to-day, and if, in fine weather, I cannot walk dry shod where I please, I will take another steward. I intend to remit a quarter of all the rents this year. You may tell the people so. You may go and see about these things at once, but

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let me hear no more of impossibilities. Only children say that things are impossible."

The man understood that the old order had departed and that Veronica Serra meant to be obeyed without question, and he never again raised his voice to suggest that there might be what he called a revolution if her orders were carried out.

As for the people of Muro, they were dumb with astonishment. They had a municipality, of course, a syndic, and a secretary, and certain head men, to whose authority they were accustomed to appeal in everything — generally against the extortion of the stewards who had obeyed Gregorio Macomer. But before Veronica had been in Muro ten days, the municipality was nothing more than the shadow of a name. The syndic was her tenant, and bowed down to her, and the rest of the illiterate officials followed his lead. It was natural enough; for they all benefited by the lowering of the rents, and they were quick to see that she meant to spend money in the place, which would be to the advantage of every one before long.

It was she who made the revolution, and not they. Before the first week was out the pigs were gone, and she walked dry shod over the stones from the castle to the entrance of the village. In less than a month the principal way was levelled and half paved, and masons were everywhere at work

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repairing those of the houses which were in most immediate need of improvement.

"You are Christians," she said to a little crowd that gathered round her one day, while she was watching the setting-up of a new door. "You shall live like Christians. When you have been clean for a month, you will never wish to be dirty again."

"That is true," answered an old man, shaking his head thoughtfully. "But, in the name of God, who has ever thought of these things? It needed this angel from Paradise."

Veronica laughed. They were docile people, and they soon found out that the young princess was as absolute a despot in character as ever terrorized Rome or ruled the Russias. At the merest suggestion of opposition, the small aquiline nose seemed to quiver, the little head was thrown back, the brown eyes gleamed, the delicate gloved hand either closed upon itself quickly or went out in a gesture of command.

But then, they sometimes saw another look in her face, though not often, and perhaps it was less natural to her though not less true to her nature. They had seen the brown eyes soften wonderfully and the small hands do very tender things, now and then, for poor children and suffering women when no one else was at hand to give aid. Yet, at most times, she was quiet, cheerful, natural, for it hap-

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pened more and more rarely that any one opposed her will.

She became to them the very incarnation of power on earth. She would have been thought rich in any country; to their utter wretchedness her wealth was fabulous beyond bounds of fairy tale. Most persons would have admitted that she was wonderfully practical and showed a great deal of common sense in what she did; to her own people she seemed preternaturally wise, only to be compared with Providence for her foresight, and much more occupied with their especial welfare than Providence could be expected to be, considering the extent of the world. She was endlessly charitable to women and children and old men, but to those who could work she was inexorable. She paid well, but she insisted that the work should be done honestly. Some of the younger ones murmured at her hardness when they had tried to deceive her.

"Would you take false money from me?" she asked. "Why should I take false work from you? You have good work to sell, and I have good money to give you for it. I do not cheat you. Do not try to cheat me."

They laughed shamefacedly and worked better the next time, for they were not without common sense, either. Doubtless, she attempted and expected more than was possible at first, but she had Don Teodoro at her elbow, and he was able to direct

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her energy, though he could not have moderated it. He found it hard, indeed, to keep pace with her swift advances towards the civilization of Muro, and he was quite incapable of entering into the boldness of some of her generalizations, which, to tell the truth, were youthful enough when she first expressed her ideas to him. But while one of his two great passions was learning, the other was charity, in that simple form which gives all it has to any one who seems to be in trouble — the charity that is universal, and easily imposed upon, and that exists spontaneously and, as it were, for its own sake, in certain warm-hearted people — an indiscriminate love of giving to the poor, the overflow of a heart so full of kindness that it would be kind to a withering flower or a half-dead tree, rather than not expend itself at all. And so, seeing the great things that were done by Veronica in Muro, and secretly giving of his very little where she gave very much, Don Teodoro grew daily to be more and more happy in the satisfaction of his strongest instinct; and little by little he, also, came to look upon his princess as the incarnation of a good power come to illuminate his darkness and to lift his people out of degradation to human estate.

Veronica was happy too. There is a sort of exhilaration and daily surprise in the first use of real power in any degree, and she enjoyed her own sensations to the fullest extent. When she was alone,

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she wrote about them to Gianluca, giving him what was almost a daily chronicle of her new life, and waiting anxiously for the answers to her letters which came with almost perfect regularity for some time after her own arrival at Muro.

They pleased her, too, though the note of sadness was more accentuated in them, as time went on and spring ran into summer. He had hoped, perhaps, that she might tire of her solitude and come down to Naples, if only for a few days; or at least, that something might happen to break what promised to be a long separation. He longed for a sight of her, and said so now and then, for letter-writing could not fill up the aching emptiness she had left in his already empty life. He had not her occupations and interests to absorb his days and make each hour seem too short, and, moreover, he loved her, whereas she was not at all in love with him.

Then, a little later, there was a tone of complaint in what he wrote, which suddenly irritated her. He told her that his life was dreary and tiresome, and that the people about him did not understand him. She answered that he should occupy himself, that he should find something to do and do it, and that she herself never had time enough in the day for all she undertook. It was the sort of letter which a very young woman will sometimes write to a man whose existence she does

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not understand, a little patronizing in tone and superior with the self-assurance of successful and unfeeling youth. She even pointed out to him that there were several things which he did not know, but which he might learn if he chose, all of which was undoubtedly true, though it was not at all what he wanted. For him, however, the whole letter was redeemed by a chance phrase at the end of it. She carelessly wrote that she wished he were at Muro to see what she had done in a short time. He knew that the words meant nothing, but he lived on them for a time, because she had written them to him. His next letter was more cheerful. He repeated her own words, as though wishing her to see how much he valued them, saying that he wished indeed that he were at Muro, to see what she had accomplished. To some extent, he added, the fulfilment of the wish only depended on herself, for in the following week he was going with his father and mother and all the family to spend a month in a place they had not far from Avellino, and that, as she knew, was not at an impossible distance from Muro. But of course he could not intrude alone upon her solitude.

When she next wrote, Veronica made no reference to this hint of his. The man was not the same person to her as the correspondent, and she very much preferred exchanging letters with him to any conversation. She did not forget what he

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had said, however, and when she supposed that the Della Spina family had gone to the country she addressed her letters to him near Avellino. He had not yet gone, however, and he soon wrote from Naples complaining that he had no news from her.

On the following day Veronica was surprised to receive a letter addressed in a hand she did not know. It was from Taquisara, and she frowned a little angrily as she glanced at the signature before reading the contents. It began in the formal Italian manner, — "Most gentle Princess," — and it ended with an equally formal assurance of respectful devotion. But the matter of the letter showed little formality.

"I have hesitated long before writing to you" — it said — "both because I offended you at our last meeting and because I have not been sure, until to-day, about the principal matter of which I have to speak. In the first place, I beg you to forgive me for having spoken to you as I did at the Princess Corleone's house. I am not skilful at saying disagreeable things gracefully. I was in earnest, and I meant what I said, but I am sincerely sorry that I should have said it rudely. I earnestly beg you to pardon the form which my intention took.

"Secondly, I wish very much that I might see you. I fear that you would not receive me, and from the ordinary point of view of society you would be acting quite rightly, since you are really

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living alone. The world, however, is quite sure that you have a companion, an elderly gentlewoman who is a distant relation of yours. It will never be persuaded that this good lady does not exist, because it cannot possibly believe that you would have the audacity to live alone in your own house.

"I wish to see you, because my friend Gianluca cannot live much longer. You may remember that he walked with difficulty, and even used a stick, before you left Naples. He can now hardly walk at all. According to the doctors, he has a mortal disease of the spine and cannot live more than two or three months. Perhaps I am telling you this very roughly, but it cannot pain you as much as it does me, and you ought to know it. He is not the man to let any one tell you of his state, and I have taken it upon myself to write to you without asking his opinion. I told you once what you were to him. All that I told you is ten times more true, now. Between you and life, he would not choose, if he could; but he is losing both. As a Christian woman, in commonest kindness, if you can see him before he dies, do so. And you can, if you will. He was to have been moved to the place near Avellino a few days ago, but he was too ill. They all leave next week, unless he should be worse. You are strong and well, and it would not be much for you to make that short journey, considering Gianluca's condition.

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"I shall not tell him that I have written to you, and I leave to you to let him know of my writing, or not, as you think fit."

Here followed the little final phrase and the signature. Veronica let the sheet fall upon her table, and gazed long and steadily at the tapestry on the wall opposite her. Her hands clasped each other suddenly and then fell apart loosely and lay idle before her. Her head sank forward a little, but her eyes still held the point on which they were looking.

In the first shock of knowing that Gianluca was to die, she felt as though she had lost a part of him already, and something she dearly valued seemed to go out of her life. Her instinct was not to go to him and see him while she could, but to look forward to the blankness that would be before her when he should be gone. Something of him was an integral part of her life. But there was something of him for which she felt that she hardly cared at all.

She was probably selfish in the common sense of that ill-used word. It is generally applied to persons who do not love those that love them, but are glad of their existence, as it were, for the sake of something they receive and perhaps return — as Veronica did. But she did not ask herself questions, for she had never had the smallest inclination to analysis or introspection. It was as clear

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to her as ever that she did not love Gianluca in the least, but that she should find it hard to be happy without him. She had been nearer to loving poor Bosio than Gianluca, though the truth was that she had never loved any one yet.

But she pitied Gianluca with all her heart. That was the most she could do for that part of him which was nothing to her, and her face grew very sad as she thought of what he might be suffering, and of how hard it must be to die so young, with all the world before one. She could not imagine herself as ever dying.

She sat still a long time and tried to think of what she should do. But her thoughts wandered, and presently she found that she was asking herself whether it were her destiny to be fatal to those who loved her. But the mere idea of fatality displeased her as something which could oppose her, and perhaps defy her. After all, Gianluca might not die. She looked over Taquisara's letter again.

He was a man who meant what he said, and he wrote in earnest. There was something in him that appealed to her, as like to like. He had been rude and had spoken almost insolently, and even now he dared to write that he meant what he had said and only regretted the words he had used. For them, indeed, his apology was sufficient — for the rest, she was undecided. She went on to what

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referred to Gianluca, and her face grew grave and sad again. It must be true.

She laid the letter in the drawer where she kept Gianluca's, but in a separate corner, by itself. Then she took up her pen to write to Gianluca, intending to take up the daily written conversation at the point where she had last broken off, on the previous evening. With an effort, she wrote a few words, and then stopped short and leaned back in her chair, staring at the tapestry. It was a grim farce to write about her streets and her houses and her charities to a man who was dying — and who loved her. Yet she could not speak of his illness without letting him know that Taquisara had informed her of it. She tried to go on, and stopped again. Poor Gianluca — he was so young! All at once her pity overflowed unexpectedly, and she felt the tears in her eyes and on her cheeks. She brushed them away, and left her letter unfinished.

Half an hour later she was with Don Teodoro, busy about her usual occupations and plans. But she was absent-minded, and matters did not go well. She left him earlier than usual and shut herself up in her own room. She had not been there a quarter of an hour, however, before she felt stifled and oppressed by the close solitude, and she came out again and climbed to the top of the dungeon tower, where the little plot of cabbages

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had been converted into a tiny flower garden, and the roses were all in bloom.

With the rising of her pity had come the desire to see Gianluca and talk with him. She could not tell why she wished it so much, after having felt so horribly indifferent at first, but the wish was there, and like all her wishes, now, it must be satisfied without delay. She was supremely powerful in her little mountain town, and on the whole she was using her power very wisely. But her dominant character was rapidly growing despotic, and it irritated her strangely to want anything which she could not have. She had almost forgotten that society had any general claims upon people who chance to belong to it, and the sudden recollection that if she went down to Naples, she could not go and see Gianluca, even under his father's and mother's roof, and talk with him if she pleased, was indescribably offensive to her over-grown sense of independence. Nor could she invite herself to Avellino to pay a visit to Gianluca's mother. She understood enough of the customs of the world with which she had really lived so little, to know that such a thing was impossible.

If she could not see him in Naples and could not go to see him at his father's place, he must come to Muro. It flashed upon her that she had a right to ask the whole Della Spina family to spend a week with her if she chose. They might think

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it extraordinary if they pleased — it would be an invitation, after all, and the worst that could happen would be that the old Duchessa might refuse it. But Veronica never anticipated refusals.

As for Gianluca, if he were well enough to be taken to Avellino, he could be brought to Muro. A journey by carriage was no more tiring than one by railway, and the change and excitement would perhaps do him good. The more she thought of the possibility of her plan as compared with the impracticable nature of any other which suggested itself, the more she looked forward with pleasure to seeing him — and the more clearly it seemed to her an act of kindness to give him an opportunity of seeing her.

And between her reflexions, strengthening her intention and hastening her action, there returned the real and deep sorrow she felt at the thought of losing her best friend, and the genuine pity she now felt for him, apart from the selfish consideration which had come first.

In the singular and anomalous position she had created for herself, there was no one whom she could consult. As for asking Don Teodoro's opinion, it never entered her head, for it would have been impossible to do so without confiding to him the nature of her friendship with Gianluca. She would not do that now. She had first told Bianca Corleone frankly enough of the exchange of let-

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ters, but she herself had not then known what that secret friendship was to mean in her life, nor how she and Gianluca would almost conceal it from each other. Besides, she was accustomed now to impose her will upon the old priest as she imposed it upon every one in her surroundings. When she asked his advice, it was about matters of expediency, and that happened every day, but she would not have thought of taking counsel with him about any action which concerned herself. If society chanced to be in opposition to her, society must either give way or make the best of it, or break with her. But it was certainly within the bounds of social tradition and custom that she should ask such of her friends as she chose, to stay with her under her own roof.

One small practical difficulty met her, and it was characteristic of her that it was the only one to which she paid any attention after she had made up her mind. She could have found fifty rooms for guests in the castle, but there were certainly not three which were now sufficiently furnished to be habitable as bedrooms. She had changed the face of the town in three months, but she had not at all improved her own establishment. There were foresters and men occupied upon the estates who came and went as their work required, and there were generally four or five of them in the house; but she was served by women, and there was not a

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man-servant in the place. She had only five horses in her stable. She glanced at the black frock she wore and smiled, realizing for the first time what Elettra had meant by protesting against her wearing it any longer.

But none of the details were of a nature to check such a woman in anything she really wished. If she chose to be waited on by women and to wear old clothes, that was her affair and concerned no one else. As for a little furniture more or less, she could get all she wanted from Naples in three or four days.

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CHAPTER XXI.

Veronica had little doubt but that her invitation would be accepted by the Della Spina. Had she been as worldly wise, as she was practical in most things, she would have had no doubts at all, though she would have hesitated long before writing to the Duchessa. For, of two things, one or the other must happen. Gianluca must either die, or not die; in the first case the least which his family could do would be to give him the opportunity of seeing the woman he loved, before his death, and, in the second, such an invitation on Veronica's part was almost equivalent to consenting to marry him if he recovered. To every one except Veronica herself, the marriage would have seemed in every way as desirable as any that could be proposed to her, both for herself and for Gianluca.

Her invitation was received with mingled astonishment and delight and was duly communicated to Gianluca himself. Veronica had written to him at the same time, and he had already read her letter telling him of her plan, when his father and mother entered the room where he was lying

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near his open window, towards evening. They were good people, and simple, according to their lights, and they were devotedly attached to their eldest son. The love of Italians for their children often goes to lengths which would amaze northern people. It may be that where there are few love-matches, as in the old Italian society, the natural ties of blood are stronger than in countries where men leave everything for the women they love.

The Duchessa's chief preoccupation and anxiety concerned her son's strength to bear the journey. From day to day the family had been on the point of moving to Avellino, and the departure had been put off because Gianluca's condition seemed altogether too precarious. It would be an even more serious matter to convey him safely to Muro; and between her extreme anxiety for his health, and her wish that he might be able to go, the Duchessa was almost distracted. But neither she nor her husband knew that the doctors despaired of his life. The truth had been kept from them, and Taquisara had extracted it from one of the physicians with considerable difficulty, having more than half guessed it during the past two months.

At the mere suggestion of going to Muro, Gianluca had revived, reading Veronica's letter alone to himself in his room. When he heard that the invitation had actually come, he seemed suddenly

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so much better that the tears started to the old Duca's weak eyes.

"We must go," said the old gentleman to his wife, as they left Gianluca to consult together. "What is the use of denying it? It is passion. If he does not marry that girl, he will die of it."

"Of course she means to marry him," answered the Duchessa, her voice tremulous with nervous delight. "It is not imaginable that she should ask us to visit her, unless she means that she has changed her mind! It would be an outrage — an insult — it would be nothing short of an abominable action — I would strangle her with these hands!"

The prematurely old woman shook her weak fingers in the air, and her passionate love for her son lent her feeble features the momentary dignity of righteous anger.

"I should hardly doubt that she would marry him after this," said the Duca, thoughtfully. "And besides — where could she find a better husband? It is passion that has made him ill."

But it was not. In what they said of Veronica's probable intention they were not altogether wrong, however, from their point of view. They were in complete ignorance of the long-continued correspondence between her and Gianluca, and had they known of it, they could not possibly have understood her way of looking at the matter.

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Such a character as hers was altogether beyond their comprehension, and they practically knew nothing of the circumstances that had lately developed it so quickly. As for her mode of life, they believed, as most people did, that she had a companion in the person of an elderly gentlewoman whom she had chosen for the purpose among her distant relations.

Even Taquisara thought substantially as they did, and he was a man singularly regardless of conventions. It was true that he was almost as ignorant of the state of affairs as Gianluca's father and mother. After the first exchange of letters Gianluca had grown suddenly reticent. So long as Veronica had seemed altogether beyond his reach he had not hesitated to confide in the brave and honourable man who was such a devoted friend to him; but as soon as he began to feel himself growing intimate with Veronica, he ceased to speak of her except in general terms. Taquisara, if he had ever felt the need of confidence, would have stopped at the same point, or earlier, and he understood, and did not press Gianluca with questions. The latter had said that from time to time Donna Veronica had been kind enough to write to him — but that was all, and he never said it again. When the Sicilian heard of the invitation to Muro, however, he felt that he had a right to express himself, since the matter was

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an open one and concerned the whole family. He felt, too, an immense satisfaction in having produced so great a result by his letter.

He had written to Veronica what the doctor had told him about the general verdict after the last consultation. For himself, his faith in doctors was not by any means blind, and he was not without some hope that Gianluca might recover. At all events, it was his duty to cheer the man as far as he could, and he imagined nothing more likely to produce a good effect than the now reasonable suggestion that Veronica might possibly change her mind.

"Of course," he said to Gianluca, "the whole situation is extraordinary beyond anything I ever knew. But since Donna Veronica has left her aunt, no one can dispute her right to do as she pleases. An invitation to you and your family means a reopening of the question of the marriage. There can be no doubt of that. In my opinion, she has reconsidered the matter and means to accept you, after all."

Gianluca smiled, and his sunken eyes brightened. But he would not admit that he really had any hopes.

"I wish I were as sanguine as you," he answered.

"If you had my temperament, you would not be where you are, my dear friend," replied Taquisara, with a dry laugh. "I look at the world differently.

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My life may not be worth much, but it is mine, and I would not let a man take it from me with his hands, nor a woman with her eyes — without fighting for it, if I had the chance."

"How can a man fight against a woman?" laughed Gianluca, for he was very happy.

"You fight a man by facing him, and a woman by turning your back on her," said Taquisara. "There are more women in the world than there are men to love them, after all. For one that will not have you, there are three who will. Take one of the three."

"What do you know about it? You always say that you were never really in love. How can you tell what you would do?"

"I suppose I cannot be quite sure. But then — the thing is ridiculous! A man must be half a poet, he must have sensibilities, ideals, visions, a nervous heart, an exaggerating eye and a mind sensitized like a photographer's plate to receive impressions!" "Do you see me provided with all that stuff?"

He laughed again, somewhat intentionally, for he meant to amuse Gianluca.

"Nor myself either," answered the latter. "I am much simpler than you imagine."

"Are you? So much the better. But it makes very little difference, since you are to be happy, after all. Seriously, I do not believe that this

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invitation can mean anything else. If it does — if she is not in earnest — " he checked himself.

Gianluca looked at him and did not understand his expression.

"What were you going to say?" asked the younger man, with some curiosity.

"Then take one of the other three!" said Taquisara, roughly, and he rose from his seat and walked to the window.

The Duchessa's answer to Veronica was dignified and friendly. After expressing her cordial thanks for the invitation, she went on to say that besides the pleasure it would give her and her son to spend a few days under Veronica's hospitable roof, she was too well acquainted by hearsay with the splendid climate and situation of Muro to refuse an offer, by accepting which she might contribute much to Gianluca's recovery, and she went on to speak of the high mountain air and the sunshine of the Basilicata. There was truth in what she said, of course, and she was too proud not to make the most of it, entirely passing over more personal matters in order to give it the greatest possible prominence. As for Taquisara, though she guessed that he was almost indispensable to Gianluca in Naples, she made no mention of him. It would have been easy for her to suggest that he also might be invited, but she suspected that her son could do without him well enough when privileged

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to see Veronica every day; moreover, he would be in the way, and would probably himself fall in love with his young hostess, who, in her turn, might take a sudden fancy to the handsome Sicilian.

It was not until the things which Veronica hastily ordered from Naples arrived in huge carts from Eboli that she began to reflect seriously upon what she had done under a sudden impulse. The Duchessa wrote that she should require four or five days to reach Muro, by easy stages, and there was plenty of time to make preparations for receiving the party. After the letter had come, Veronica spoke to Don Teodoro, who had noticed her extreme preoccupation and was wondering what could have happened.

"I think I understand," he said, looking at her quietly. "It is right — you are young, but the years pass very quickly."

"What do you mean?" asked Veronica, whose sad face still puzzled him.

"What can their coming mean?" he asked, in reply, with a smile.

"What? It is I who do not understand — or you — or both of us. Don Gianluca and I are friends. He is very, very ill. The doctors say that he cannot live many months, and unless I see him now, I shall never see him again."

The old priest gazed at her in distressed sur-

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prise, and for a long time he found nothing to say. Veronica remained silent, scarcely conscious of his presence, leaning back in her chair, with folded hands and sorrowful eyes. The thought that Gianluca was to die was becoming more and more unceasingly painful, day by day. The fact that he wrote regularly to her, and yet never spoke of his condition, made it worse; for it proved to her that he could be brave rather than knowingly increase her anxiety, and the suffering of a brave man gets more true sympathy from women than the cruel death of many cowards.

"I think you are very rash," said Don Teodoro, gravely, breaking the silence at last.

Veronica turned upon him instantly, with wide and gleaming eyes, amazed at the slightest sign of opposition, criticism, or advice.

"Rash!" she exclaimed. "Why? Have I not the right to ask whom I please, and will, to stay under my own roof? Who has authority over me, to say that I shall have this one for a friend, or that one, old or young? Am I a free woman, or a schoolgirl, or a puppet doll, to which the world can tie strings to make me dance to its silly music? Rash! What rashness is there in asking my friend and his father and mother here? My dear Don Teodoro, you will be telling me before long that I should take some broken-down old lady for a companion!"

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"I have sometimes wondered that you do not send for one of your relations," said the priest, who, mild as he was, could not easily be daunted when he believed himself right.

"I will make my house a refuge, or a hospital if need be, for our poor people," answered Veronica, "but not for my relations, whom I have never seen. I send them money sometimes, but they shall not come here to beg. That would be too much. I had enough of those I knew. I am willing to feed anything that needs food except vultures. I have chosen to live alone, and alone I will live. The world may scream itself mad and crack with horror at my doings, if it is so sensitive. It cannot hurt me, and if I choose to shut my gates, it cannot get in. Besides, they are coming, the Duca, the Duchessa, and Don Gianluca, and that ends the matter."

"Nevertheless —" began Don Teodoro, still obstinately unwilling to retract his word.

"Dear friend," interrupted Veronica, with sudden gentleness, for she was fond of him, "I like you very much. I respect you immensely. I could not do half I am doing without you. But you do not quite understand me. I am sorry that you should think me rash, if the idea of rashness is unpleasant to you — I will make any other concession in reason rather than quarrel with you. But please do not argue with me when I have made up

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my mind. I am quite sure that I shall have my own way in the end, and when the end comes, you will be very glad that you could not hinder me, because I am altogether right. Now we understand each other, do we not?"

Don Teodoro could not help smiling in a hopeless sort of way, and he lifted his hands a moment, spreading out the palms as though to express that he cleared his conscience of all possible responsibility. So they parted good friends, without further words.

But when Veronica was alone, she began to realize that Don Teodoro was not so altogether in the wrong as she believed herself to be in the right. People might certainly be found whom she could not class with the world she so frankly despised, and who would say that if Gianluca recovered she should marry him, after extending such an invitation to him and his people, and that, if she did not, she would deserve to be called a heartless flirt — from their point of view. Gianluca's father and mother might say so.

He himself, at least, must know her better than that, she thought. And then, there was the terrible earnestness of Taquisara's letter, the sober statement of his best friend, next to herself, and a statement which it must have cost the man something to make, since it was necessarily accompanied by an apology. After all, though he had insulted

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her, she liked Taquisara for the whole-hearted way in which he took Gianluca's part in everything. There was that statement, and she felt that it was a true one. Gianluca was more to her than any one she knew, in a way which no one could understand, and she had a right to see him before he died. If, by any happy chance, he should live, people might perhaps talk. She should not care, for she should have done right. That was the way in which she accounted to herself for her action; but the consciousness that Don Teodoro was not quite wrong was there. She remembered it afterwards, when the fatality that was quietly lying in wait for her raised its head from ambush and stared her in the face. But then, at the first beginning, she was angry with the old priest for trying to oppose her.

There was not more than time to finish the preparations, after all, for she received a note from the Duchessa, written from Eboli, saying that they would arrive a day earlier than they had expected, as the heat in the plain was intense, and they were anxious to get Gianluca to a cooler region of the mountains as soon as possible. Veronica had written, too, placing the castle at Laviano at their disposal, as a resting-place, so as to break the journey more easily for the invalid, and she sent men over to see that all was in order and to take a few necessary things for the guests.

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It was a sort of caravan that at last halted before the fountain of Muro, at the entrance to the village. Veronica had been warned of their near approach, and was there to meet them, with Don Teodoro by her side.

First came the Duca and Duchessa together in a huge carriage drawn by four horses, with three servants, two men and a maid. Veronica could not see past the vehicle, as it blocked the way, and she stopped beside it to greet the couple.

"My dear child!" cried the Duchessa. "We shall never forget your kindness, and all the trouble you have taken! Gianluca is in the next carriage. I think you have saved his life!"

There was a sort of inoffensive motherliness in her tone which surprised Veronica — a suggestion of possession that irritated her. But she smiled, said a few words, and ordered the carriage to move on, — an operation which, though difficult in such a narrow way, was possible since she had improved and paved the streets. A couple of her men walked before the horses to clear the way of the women and children and the few men who were not away at work, for the news of the arrival had spread, and the people flocked together to see whether the visitors would bear comparison with their princess.

As the carriage rolled into the street, Veronica went up to meet the next. It was a very long landau, and in it Gianluca was almost lying down,

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his pale face and golden beard in strong relief against a dark brown silk cushion. To Veronica's amazement, Taquisara sat beside him, calmly smoking one of those long black cigars which he preferred to all others. He threw it away, when he saw her. She shook hands frankly with Gianluca.

"I am very glad you are here," she said kindly and cheerfully. "You will get well here. How do you do?" she added, turning to Taquisara as naturally as though she had expected him, for she supposed that there must have been some misunderstanding.

He explained his coming in a few words, before Gianluca could finish the sentence he began.

"He hates strangers," he said, "and I came up with him, to be of use on the journey. I am going back at once."

"You will not go back this evening, at all events," answered Veronica, with a little hospitable smile.

She was grateful to him for Gianluca's sake, both for his letter and for having accompanied his friend. For what had gone before, he had apologized and was forgiven.

"I beg your pardon," he answered. "I think I shall be obliged to go back this afternoon."

"Has he any engagement that obliges him to return?" asked Veronica of Gianluca.

As she turned to him, she met his deep blue

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eyes, fixed on her face with a strange look, half happy, half hungry, half appealing.

"He has no engagement that I know of," he answered.

"Then you will stay," she said to Taquisara. "Go on!" she added to the coachman, without giving time for any further answer.

There was a note in her short speech which the Sicilian had never heard before then. It was the tone of command — not of the drill-sergeant, but of the conqueror. He almost laughed to himself as the carriage moved slowly on, while Veronica and Don Teodoro followed on foot.

"You must stay, if she wishes it," said Gianluca, in a low voice.

"I am not used to being ordered to quarters in that way," answered Taquisara, smiling in genuine amusement. "I can be of no more use to you when I have got you up to your room, and I think I shall go back as I intended."

"I would not, if I were you. After all, it is a hospitable invitation, and you cannot invent any reasonable excuse for refusing to stay at least one night. The horses are worn out, too. You have no pretext."

"Perhaps not. I will see."

The carriages moved at a foot pace. As Veronica walked along she nodded and spoke to many of the poor people, who drew back into their doors

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from the narrow way. Behind her came two more carriages laden with luggage, and one of her own men on horseback closed the procession. By urging his stout beast up all the short cuts, he had accomplished the feat of keeping up with the vehicles.

When they reached the castle gate, the Della Spina's two men-servants jumped down and got a sort of sedan chair from amongst the luggage, but Gianluca would not have it.

"I can walk to-day," he said. "Help me, Taquisara. Have you got my stick? Thank you. No, do not lift me. Let me get out alone! I am sure that I can do it."

Pale as he was, he blushed with annoyance at his feeble state, when he saw Veronica's anxious eyes watching his movements.

It was early yet, but the August sun sank behind the lofty heights to westward, as he set his foot upon the ground. Taquisara's arm was around him, and the Sicilian's face was quiet and unconcerned, but Veronica saw the straining of the brown hand that supported the tall invalid, and she knew that Gianluca could not have stood alone. But he would not let the servants come near him. The old Duca and his wife touched his sleeve and asked him nervous, futile questions, and begged him to allow himself to be carried. Veronica stood in front, ready to lead the way.

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"No, no!" exclaimed Gianluca, answering his mother. "You see. I can walk very well to-day, with scarcely any help."

But his first step was unsteady, and the next was slow. Veronica heard the uncertain footfall on the flagstones and turned again.

"Will you take my arm on this side?" she asked gently, placing herself on his right, away from Taquisara.

He hesitated, smiled, and then laid his hand upon her arm, and she and Taquisara led him in together, the old couple following, and looking at each other in silence from time to time. Through the dark, inclined way, they all went up slowly into the courtyard and under the low door, dark even on that summer's afternoon, slowly, stopping at every dozen paces and then moving on again. Taquisara almost carrying his friend with his right arm, while Veronica steadied him on the other side, till they came out at last into a room which had been furnished as a sort of sitting-room and library, especially for Gianluca's use. He sank down into a deep chair facing the window, and drew breath, as he sought Veronica's eyes.

"You are very kind," he said faintly. "But you see how much better I am," he added at once, in a more cheerful tone. "It is the first walk I have taken for several days, Donna Veronica. I have really been ill, you know."

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"I know you have," she said, and she turned quickly away, for she felt more than she cared to show just then.

Possibly the Duca and his wife were too much preoccupied about their son's condition to think seriously of what was taking place, but it was strange enough in its way, and Taquisara thought so as he looked on, and wondered what Neapolitan society would think if it could stand, as one man, in his place, and see with his eyes, knowing what he knew. But he had not much time for reflexion. Veronica's women had brought Gianluca wine, and his mother was giving him certain drops of a stimulant in a glass of fragrant old malvoisie, while his father bent over him anxiously, still asking useless questions. Veronica beckoned Taquisara aside, and they stood together behind Gianluca's chair.

"That is his bedroom," she said, pointing to one of the doors, "and that is yours," she added, pointing to one opposite.

"Mine? But you did not expect me —"

"I naturally supposed that he would have a man with him, to take care of him," she answered. "If you are really his friend as you say you are, stay with him. You see that he cannot get about without you. If either of you need anything, ask for it," she added, before he could reply.

"I would rather not stay," said Taquisara, looking gravely into her face.

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"Have you a good reason? What is it?" Her features hardened a little.

"I cannot tell you my reason. It concerns myself."

"Then try and forget yourself, for you are needed here," she answered almost sternly.

For two or three seconds they looked into each other's eyes, neither yielding. Then Taquisara gave way.

"I will stay," he said shortly, and he turned his face from her with a sort of effort. "Is there a doctor here?" he asked, looking towards the group of persons who stood around Gianluca.

"Yes — a good one, whom I have lately brought. Shall I send for him? Do you think he is worse?" She asked the question anxiously.

"No. No doctors can do him any good — but if he should be suddenly worse, after the long journey — "

"Do you think it is likely?" asked Veronica, interrupting him in a tone of increasing anxiety.

He turned to her again, and watched her face, curiously, wondering whether she loved the man, after all.

"I hope not," he answered quietly. "But it was a fatiguing drive, and he hardly slept at all last night. I suppose that the excitement kept him awake. He should rest as soon as possible."

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"Very well," said Veronica. "I will take his father and mother away and give them tea. Stay with him and make him lie down and sleep, if possible. Dinner is at half-past seven. Let me know if we are to wait for him."

She went to Gianluca's side and spoke to the Duchessa.

"Shall I show you your rooms?" she asked. "Then we can have tea. Don Gianluca must be tired, and he should have quiet and rest before dinner — or if he prefers it, we will not expect him to-night. Sleep first, and decide afterwards," she added, addressing Gianluca himself, and her tone grew suddenly gentle as she spoke to him.

"You are very wise for your age, my dear child!" answered the Duchessa, in the motherly tone that irritated Veronica.

The old gentleman nodded gravely, being quite too much preoccupied and surprised to judge at all of his hostess's wisdom, but delighted with the effect which the change of air seemed already to have produced upon Gianluca.

They went away together, leaving the invalid with Taquisara and his own servant. Veronica led them to her favourite room, then showed them their own, and went back to wait for them, while Elettra brought the tea, just as she had done of old in the Palazzo Macomer. Veronica watched her while she was arranging the tea-table. Elettra,

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who rarely spoke unbidden, ventured to make a remark.

"Their Excellencies will be surprised at being waited on by women," she said; for though she hated all men-servants, she had pride for the great old house her fathers had served.

"They will be surprised at so many things that they will not notice it," answered her mistress, thoughtfully.

Elettra glanced at her quickly, but said nothing and went away, leaving her alone. She sat quite still, and did not move until the old couple came back, ten minutes later. She moved chairs forward for them to sit in, and poured out a cup of tea for each. Meanwhile they all three made little idle observations about the weather and the place.

The Duchessa, holding her cup in her hand, looked at the door from time to time, as though expecting some one to come in. At last she could contain her curiosity no longer.

"And where is your companion, my dear?" she asked suddenly.

"In the imagination of society, Duchessa," answered Veronica. "I have none. I live alone."

The Duchessa almost dropped her cup.

"Alone?" she cried, in amazement. "You live alone? In such a place as this!" She could not believe her ears.

"Yes," said Veronica, smiling. "Does it seem

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so very terrible to you? I live alone — and I am waited on only by women. I daresay that surprises you, too."

"Alone?" The Duca had got his breath, and sat open-mouthed, holding his tea-cup low between his knees, in both hands. "Alone! At your age! A young girl! But the world — society? What will it think?"

"Unless it thinks as I do, I do not care to know," answered Veronica, indifferently. "Let me give you some bread and butter, Duca."

"Bread and butter? No — no thank you — no — I — I am very much astonished! I am stupefied! It is the most extraordinary thing I ever heard of!"

"Of course everybody thinks that you have an elderly companion — " chimed in the Duchessa.

"One of your Spanish relations," said the Duca, with anxious eyes. "Surely, she was here — "

"And is away just now," suggested his wife. "That accounts for — "

"Not at all," said Veronica, almost laughing. "She never existed. I came here alone, I live here alone, and I mean to live here alone as long as I please. The world may say what it pleases. I shall be three-and-twenty years of age on my next birthday. Ask Don Teodoro whether I am not able to take care of myself — and of Muro, too, for that matter!"

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"Who is Don Teodoro?" asked the Duchessa, nervously, and still altogether horrified.

"The parish priest," said Veronica. "A very learned and charitable old man. He dines with me every evening."

"Then," replied the Duchessa, with a beginning of relief, "then you, and your good priest, and your woman, make a sort of — of what shall I say — a sort of little religious community here? Is that it?"

"We are not irreligious," Veronica replied, still at the point of laughter. "Most of us hear mass every morning — the church is close by the gate, on the other side of the great tower, you know — and we do not eat meat on fast days —"

"Yes, yes, I understand!" interrupted the Duchessa, grasping at any straw by which she could drag the extraordinary young princess within conceivable distance of what she herself considered socially proper. "And you spend your time in good works, in the village, of course, and in edifying conversation with Don Teodoro. Yes — I see! As you put it at first, it was a little startling, but I understand it better now. You understand it, Pompeo, do you not? It is quite clear, now."

The Duca rejoiced in the baptismal name of Pompey, like many of his class in the south, whereas the name of Cæsar is more common about Rome.

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"I have at least done something for the village," said Veronica. "It was in a bad state when I came here."

"It is a very clean village," observed the Duca, whose eyes still had a puzzled look in them, though his jaw had slowly recovered from its fall of amazement. "I saw no pigs in the streets. One generally sees a great many pigs in these mountain towns."

"I turned them out," said Veronica.

She went on to give a little account of the improvements she had introduced, not in vanity, but to keep them from returning to the subject of her living alone. They listened with profound interest, and with almost as much astonishment as they had shown at first.

"But do you find no opposition here?" asked the Duca. "You seem to do just as you please."

"Of course," answered Veronica. "The place belongs to me. Why should I not do as I like? There are a few tolerably well-to-do people here, who own a little property. Everything I do is to their advantage as well as to that of the poor peasants, so that they all side with me. No," she concluded thoughtfully, "I do not think that any one would oppose me in Muro. But if any one should, I have decided what to do!"

"And what should you do?" asked the Duchessa, rather nervously.

"I should send the whole family to America,

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with a little money in their pockets. They are always glad to emigrate, and the opposition would be quite out of the way in the Argentine Republic." Veronica laughed quietly.

When the Duca and his wife went to dress for dinner they had some very disturbing ideas concerning the character of the young Princess of Acireale.

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CHAPTER XXII.

TAQUISARA, almost for the first time in his life, did not know how to act, but in accepting Veronica's invitation he felt that he could really be of use to Gianluca, and he saw how unbendingly determined the young princess was that he should stay. He had very good reasons for not staying, but they were of such a nature that he could not explain them to her. He had the power, he thought, to leave Muro at a moment's notice, and in yielding to Veronica's insistence, he was only submitting, as a gentleman should, in small matters, rather than engage in a contest of will with a woman. Yet he knew the matter was neither small nor indifferent, when he gave way to her, and afterwards.

Gianluca appeared at the dinner hour and reached the dining-room with his friend's help. He was placed on Veronica's left, in consideration of being an invalid, though Taquisara should have been there, according to Italian laws of precedence. Veronica had insisted that Don Teodoro should come, at all events on this first evening. She did not choose that the learned old priest should be merely the companion of her loneliness; and besides,

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she knew that his presence would probably prevent the Duca and Duchessa from returning to the question of her solitary mode of life. She was also willing to let them see that the humble curate was a man of the world.

It was a day of surprises for the old couple, and their manners were hard put to it to conceal their astonishment at the way in which Veronica dined. They were, indeed, accustomed to a singular simplicity in the country, and to country dishes, as almost all the more old-fashioned Italians are, but in the whole course of their highly and rigidly aristocratic lives they had never been waited on by two women in plain black frocks and white aprons. The Duca, indeed, found some consolation in the delicious mountain trout, the tender lamb, the perfect salad, and the fine old malvoisie, for he liked good things and appreciated them; but the Duchessa's nature was more austerely indifferent to the taste of what she ate, while her love of established law insisted with equal austerity that any food, good or bad, should be brought before her in a certain way, by a certain number of men, arrayed in coats of a certain cut, and shaven till their faces shone like marble. In a measure, it was a slight upon her dignity, she thought, that Veronica should let her be served by waitresses. On the other hand, she reflected upon the conversation which had taken place at tea, and was forced to admit that

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she had then discovered the only theory on which she could accept Veronica's anomalous position, and conscientiously remain in the house. Either she must look upon the castle of Muro and its inhabitants as a sort of semi-religious community of women, or else, in her duty to the world, and the station to which she had always belonged, she must raise her voice in protests, loud and many. For many reasons, she did not wish to insist too much, and she did her best to seem indifferent, keeping her arguments before her mind while she ate. The chief of them was, indeed, that she clung desperately to the hope of a marriage; but in her heart there was something else, and she knew that she was afraid of Veronica. It seemed ridiculous, but it was true. And her husband was even more afraid of the dominating young princess than she. They never acknowledged the fact to each other, when they exchanged moralities, and discussed Veronica, but each was afraid, and suspected the other of similar cowardice.

The Duchessa did her best to seem indifferent; but now and then, when one of the women changed her plate, or poured something into her glass, she could not help slowly looking round, with an air of bewilderment, as though expecting to see a man in livery at her elbow.

As for Gianluca, Veronica had described in her letters the way in which she lived; and Taquisara's face more often betrayed amusement than surprise

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at what he saw in the world. On the present occasion, having accepted the situation into which his affection for his friend had led him, he had accepted it altogether, and behaved as though he were at a dinner party in Naples, cheerfully making conversation, telling amazing stories of brigandage in Sicily, asking Veronica questions about the surrounding country, and giving such scraps of news about mutual friends as his letters had recently brought him.

Veronica had never seen the man under such circumstances, and she was surprised by his readiness and by his ability to help her in a rather difficult situation. He said nothing which she could compare with what Gianluca wrote. He never spoke of himself, and she did not afterwards remember that he had made any very brilliant observation; and yet, when dinner was over, she wished to hear him talk more, just as she had once longed to hear him say again the things he had said to her for Gianluca's sake in Bianca's garden. She had never met any one who seemed to have such a decided personality, without the slightest apparent desire to assert it. Instinctively, as women know such things, she felt that he was a very manly man, very simple and brave, and vain, if at all, with the sort of vanity which well becomes a soldierly character — the little touch of willing recklessness that easily stirs woman's admiration.

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What women hate most, next to cowardice, is, perhaps, the caution of the very experienced brave man — and they hate it all the more because they cannot despise it with any show of reason.

Gianluca was silently happy, perfectly satisfied to hear Veronica's voice, to watch the face he loved, and to feel that between her and him there was something which no one knew. When they spoke, there was a little constraint on both sides; but when they were silent, the bond was instantly renewed. In silence and in imagination, they were writing to each other the impressions of which they would not speak. Gianluca was telling her how grateful he was to her for insisting that Taquisara should stay, after all, and was pointing out to her that his friend was bravely bearing the burden of a conversation which kept his father and mother from prosing about the necessity of a companion for Veronica. Veronica was replying that Taquisara was more agreeable than she had expected, but that if he had been as silent as the Sphinx, or as noisy as Alexander the Coppersmith, she would have pressed him to stay because he was her friend's friend. There was a good deal about Taquisara in their imaginary correspondence.

But both felt a little more constraint, when they talked, than they had ever felt before, for both knew that on the morrow, or on the next day, at the latest, they were sure to be alone together, —

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quite alone, — for the first time; and they wondered whether the curious duality of their acquaintance and intimacy by word and by letter could be maintained hereafter, or whether it would suddenly resolve itself into a unity in the shape of a friendship in which they should speak to each other as they wrote.

They knew that something of the sort must happen. The Duca and his wife would certainly not stand sentry from morning till night over the young people, when they themselves so ardently desired the marriage; and Taquisara was not the man to be in the way when he was not wanted. It would be in Veronica's power to put off the meeting, if she chose to do so; but she knew, and Gianluca guessed, that she would not. Whatever society might say about it, she had assumed the position and the independence of a married woman, and had gone further than married women of her age would generally have the courage to go. To hesitate now, and to draw back from the possibility of being left alone with any one of her guests, would be absurd. She would not seek the interview, nor she would not do anything to avoid it. But she did not wish to be forced into the necessity of talking alone with Taquisara, if it could be helped. She was sure, though she had forgiven him, and liked him better than before, that she should certainly quarrel with him, though she did

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not know why there should be any further disagreement between them.

Possibly she recognized in him a will less despotic than her own, but quite as unbending when he chose to exercise it. The certainty of strong opposition, which is fear in cowards, becomes combativeness in brave people, and the fighting instinct takes the place of the inclination to run away. But Veronica had no further reason for quarrelling with Taquisara; and because she liked him, she determined to avoid him as much as possible, lest at the very first point of difference in conversation there should be war between them about some insignificant matter perfectly indifferent to both.

Her guests went to bed early. While Gianluca was before her, Veronica had not retained the impression she had received from Taquisara, that her friend was a doomed man. Her own vitality lent the sure certainty of life, in her imagination, to those about her. He was faint and tired from the journey, of course, but he was by no means the utterly helpless invalid she had expected to see, and she had not believed, so long as she could watch him, that he was in mortal danger. But when she was in her own room, his face came back to her, a pale shade out of dark shadow, and she saw the hollows about his deep blue eyes, his thin, bluish temples, his transparent features, and his emaciated throat, that seemed to have fallen away

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under his white ears. She was so suddenly and violently disturbed by the recollection that she spoke to Elettra of him. The woman had seen him go by when the party had arrived.

"Do you think that Don Gianluca looks very ill?" Veronica asked.

"Excellency —" the maid hesitated. "I wish that all may live — but he seems a dead man."

Veronica said nothing, but it was long before she got to sleep that night, and the vision of his face came again and again to her, pale, haggard, haunting, distressing her exceedingly. She rose even earlier than usual.

She did not mean that the presence of her guests should interfere with what had now become a connected work, to interrupt which would be an injury to the whole and an injustice to the people who had learned to expect it of her, looking for more, as she gave them more, and turning to her in every difficulty. But for the arrival of the party on the previous afternoon she would have gone down to an outlying farm in the valley, where the farmhouse needed repairs and there was a question of cutting down a number of olive trees so old that they hardly bore any fruit. She had ordered her mare at half-past seven in the morning, and she rode down the long, winding road, saw, judged, and gave orders, galloped most of the way up, and exchanged her riding-habit for her morning frock before the clock struck ten.

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One after another, her guests appeared, and everything happened as she had foreseen. The old couple said that they were accustomed to take a little walk before the midday meal, for the sake of their appetite; Taquisara disappeared when he had helped Gianluca to a big chair in a balcony, in the shade, outside the drawing-room, and Gianluca was left alone with her, as she had expected. She established herself opposite to him, for the balcony was so narrow that two chairs could not be placed upon it side by side.

It was a magnificent summer's day, one of those days in which the whole glory of the south fills heaven and earth and air, and the stupendous tide of universal life pours into every sense, to very overflowing, as the ocean fills its world-wide bed. And the world was ripe and ripening, the corn and wheat, and olive and vine, and fruit and flower and tree, from the rich valley below, up the rough hills, as far as sun and soil and rain could draw the dress of beauty over the mountains' grand bare strength. Down there, in the vast garden, the hot air quivered with sheer living; above, the solemn peaks faced God in the still sun. The breath of the high breeze, between earth and heaven, blew upon Veronica's cheek.

They looked at each other and sat silent, and looked again and smiled, both happy in those ever-written, never-spoken thoughts which were theirs

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together, both fearing speech as a common thing which must jar and shake them rudely back to their other selves, which were formal, and constrained, and not at all intimate.

Gianluca lay quite still in his deep chair, his white hands motionless upon the edge of the grey shawl which was thrown over his knees. Suddenly, Veronica, sitting close and opposite to him, bent far forward and gently laid her hand upon one of his. She smiled.

"I am glad that you are here," she said simply, looking into his face.

His own brightened, and the blue eyes grew dark and tender, while her hand lingered a second.

"How good you are to me!" he exclaimed, in a low voice. "How endlessly good!"

She was still smiling as she withdrew her hand and leaned back in her chair once more. A little pause followed, during which both were quite happy, in different ways — he, perhaps, in all ways at once, and she, because she felt she had broken through something like a sheet of ice by a mere gesture and half a dozen words, when it had seemed so hard to do.

"No," she said thoughtfully, at last. "It is not a question of goodness. I am natural — that is all. I do not believe that many people are. And we had got into an absurd position, you and I!" She laughed, looking at him. "We could write,

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but we could not speak. We each knew what the other was thinking of, and yet, somehow, neither of us could say what we thought. Was it not as I say?"

"Yes." Gianluca laughed, too, very faintly because he was weak, though he was so happy.

"It could not last," Veronica continued, "and I am glad it is over. For it is over, is it not? We can talk quite frankly now. Last night, for instance. I am sure I know what you were thinking about."

"About Taquisara? At dinner?"

"Of course. He is so much more agreeable than I expected, and I am so glad that I made him stay. And then, last night, too — did you see how your mother looked at the serving-woman, expecting to see the butler? It was so natural. It was just what I should have done in her place, and I could hardly keep from laughing."

"My dear old mother is not used to such surprises," answered Gianluca. "Of course I saw it, and knew that you did."

"Yes — but do you not think that I am quite right?" asked Veronica, her tone changing suddenly as she seemed to appeal to him for support — she, who needed so little from anybody.

"Of course you are," he answered promptly.

He felt unaccountably flattered and pleased by the mere fact of her asking him the question. He

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felt instinctively that she had never asked any one's opinion about her conduct, and that she really desired his approval. She, on her part, was perhaps glad to speak freely at last about the position she had assumed. If he had called her rash just then, she would not have answered him as she had answered Don Teodoro when he had used the same word.

"You see," she said, "I am not like other women. I was brought up in a convent, like most of them, but the rest of my life has been quite different. Well — you know, if any one does. I used to write you all about what I meant to do while I was still living with Bianca, and you know that I have begun to carry out most of my ideas. Yesterday afternoon, while you were resting, your father and mother and I had tea together, and she found out for the first time that I had no companion. You should have seen her face! And then, when I tried to explain, she got the impression at once that I meant to live here in a sort of amateur convent, surrounded by women. I think she rather liked the idea. It seemed to settle her disturbed prejudices a little. Of course — it must seem stranger to people who all live in the same way as she does. Oh! how glad I am that we can talk about it, you and I!"

Again she laughed happily. To Gianluca, as his eyes met hers, it seemed as though a great

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wave of the huge, exuberant life that filled the full-blossoming world that day had rolled up out of the broad valley to his feet and were lifting him and penetrating him and sweeping its hot tide through the ebb of his failing blood.

"Yes," he answered her. "To be able to talk at last — at last, after so much waiting, that was only half talking."

He sighed gently, and his hand stroked the grey shawl on his knees, smoothing it first in one way and then backwards in the other. She watched him, and thought that she had never seen a hand so thin.

"We shall never go back to the old way, shall we?" he asked, before she spoke again.

"I hope not!" she answered. "It was so absurd, sometimes. Do you remember at Bianca's house —"

"The night before you left? When I forgot my stick?"

"Yes; but before that. You seemed to think that there was to be no more writing because I was coming here."

Of course — that is, I supposed that it might make a difference —"

"And then you asked me. You should have seen your face! I can remember it now. It changed all at once."

"It is no wonder. You changed the whole

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future with one word. You seemed really to want my letters much more than I had imagined that you did."

As by the quick lifting of a dividing veil, all the awkward little incidents and memories of constraint had suddenly become parts of the much larger and more pleasant recollection of their semi-secret intimacy, and in blending with the broader picture the little ones somehow ceased to have anything disagreeable in them, and instead, there was a touch of humour and a suggestion of laughter each time that they compared what they had said and done with what they had written and felt. It was no wonder that the fascination grew on Gianluca with every dancing beat of the happy man's pulse.

They talked on, and in the way she talked Veronica showed that while her character had grown in three-quarters of a year from girlhood to womanhood, and from womanhood to the half-imperial masculinity of a dictatress, her heart was younger than the youngest, was as unsuspicious of itself as a child's, ready to give itself in an innocent generosity which could not conceive that giving might mean being taken, or be as like it as to deceive such a willing, love-sick man as poor Gianluca. She did not say that she loved him, she did not love him, she did not wish him to think that she could love him. Why should he think that

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she did? Surely, that he loved her, or thought so, could make no difference.

She was so very young, under her armour of despotism, that she might almost have loved him, as she had all but loved Bosio, had there been anything to love. But there was not. Gianluca was a shadow, an unmaterial being, a thought — anything ethereal, but not a man.

The dream-driven ghost of her dead betrothed was ten times more human and real than Gianluca was to her now, with his white angel's face and misty hands that seemed to hang weightless in the air before him when he moved them. There was more of living humanity in the fast fainting echo of Bosio's last words to her than in Gianluca's clear, sweet tones. If he should tell her that he loved her now, she should perhaps not even blush; for his whole being was sifted and refined and distilled, as the very spirit of star dust, in which there was nothing left of that sweet, earthly living, breathing, dying, loving flesh and blood without which love itself is but a scholar's word, and passion means but a vague, spiritual suffering, in which there is neither hope of joy to come nor memory of any past.

Yet Gianluca breathed, and was a human man, and loved her, and he would have been strangely surprised had he suddenly seen into her heart and understood that she looked upon him as though

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he were a being out of another world. The moment when she had first laid her hand upon his had been the supremest of his life yet lived, and all the moments since had been as supremely happy. It was something which he had not dared to hope — to hear her speaking as though there had never been that veil between them, against which he had so often struggled, to feel her warm touch, to see the happy light in her young eyes as she sat there looking at him, to be sure at last, beyond the half assurance of uncertain written words.

But he was wise, and he bridled back the words that most readily of all others would have come to his lips. Perhaps even in the midst of his new happiness, there was the unacknowledged fear of evil chance if he should speak too soon and put the beautiful gold to the touch while the magic transmutation was still so dazzlingly fresh. The present was so immeasurably better than the past, so near a perfection of its own, that he could wait in it a while before he opened wide his arms to take in the very whole of happiness itself, wherewith the beautiful future stood full laden before him.

As they talked, they went over and over much that they had written to each other during the long months of their correspondence, and at last Veronica came back to the question she had at first asked him.

"So you think that I am sensible in living as I

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do," she said. "I am glad. I value your opinion, you know."

She had perhaps never said as much as that to any one.

"You have made it what it is," he answered.

"How do you mean?" she asked quickly.

"You cannot do wrong," he replied, with his faint, far-off laugh. "If I had read in a book, of an imaginary person, all that you have written me of yourself, I should have said that most of it was absolutely impossible, or wildly rash, or foolishly unwise. You know how we are all brought up. We are nursed in the arms of tradition, we are fed on ideas of custom — we are taken to walk, as children, by incarnate prejudice for a nursery maid, and taught to see things that used to be, where modern things are. What can you expect? We have not much originality by the time we grow up."

"Yes — you know that I was educated in a convent."

"That is better than being educated at home by a priest." Gianluca smiled again. "Besides, you are different. That is why I say that if I have an opinion, you have made it for me. You are doing all those things which I could not have believed in a book, and they are turning out well. If society could see you here, it would not find it necessary to invent a duenna to chaperon you. But it is not

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everybody who could do what you have done, and succeed. I do not wonder that my mother is astonished, and my father, too. But at the same time, since you can do such things, it seems to me that you would have made a great mistake in doing anything else — as great a mistake as Julius Cæsar would have made if he had chosen to remain a fashionable lawyer instead of mixing in politics, or Achilles, if he had taken a necklace or a bracelet and left the sword in Ulysses' basket. You would have found your mythical duenna a nuisance in real life."

Veronica laughed.

"At the end of the first week I should have locked her up in the dungeon tower, to get rid of her," she said.

"I have no doubt that you would, and your people would have thought it the most natural thing in the world. You could do anything you pleased in this place, I fancy. They would not think it strange if you tried and condemned a cheating steward and had him executed in that gloomy courtyard we passed through when we came in yesterday."

"The law might find fault with my vivacity," said Veronica. "But my people would say that I had done right if the man had really cheated them. It is quite true, I think. I could do almost anything here. I had a man locked up in the munici-

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pal prison the other day for forty-eight hours, because he was tipsy and swore at Don Teodoro in the street. Of course, it is nominally the syndic who does that sort of thing; but he belongs to me, like everything else here, and I do as I please, just as my grandfather did, when he really had power of life and death in Muro, including the privilege of torture. The first article mentioned in the old inventory was forty palms of stout rope for giving the cord, as they called it. They did it under the main gate, — that is why it came first, — and they used to pull them up to the vault and then drop them with a jerk to within two feet of the ground. The ring is still there, just inside the gate."

"My mother's uncle — the old Marchese di Rionero — once hanged a ruffian for mutilating one of his horses out of spite. And they say that Italy has not progressed! There is no hanging, not even for murder, nowadays."

"Yes," answered Veronica, thoughtfully, "we have progressed, in a way. That is our trouble — we have progressed too fast and improved too little, I think."

"That sounds paradoxical."

"Oh no! It is common sense, as I mean it. Progress costs money, improvement brings it. Progress means wearing clothes like other people, having splendid cities like other nations, keeping

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up armies and navies like other great powers. Improvement means helping poor people to earn more wages and to live better — giving them a possibility of happiness, instead of taking the little they have in order to give ourselves the appearance of greatness. That is why I say that in Italy we have too much progress and too little improvement."

"Yes — how well you put it!" Gianluca looked at her with quick admiration.

"Do I? It is because you understand easily. Should you call me patriotic? I think I am. I am an Italian before anything else, before being a Serra, a woman, a member of society — anything! I feel as though I should like to give my heart for my people and my life for our country, if it would do any good. Of course, if it really came to making any great sacrifice, I suppose my courage would shrivel up and I should behave just like any one else."

"No — you would not," said Gianluca, gravely. "There have been women — the great Countess, and Saint Catherine of Siena —"

"Yes!" Veronica laughed. "And there were also my good ancestors, who tore Italy to pieces, joined hands with German Emperors, upset Popes, seized everything they could lay hands upon, and turned the country into a sort of perpetual gladiator's show. That is a proud and promising inheritance

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for an aspiring patriot, is it not? The less you and I talk of patriotism, the better — seeing what our people have done in history to make patriotism necessary in our time."

"Perhaps so. Doing is better than talking, and you have begun by doing good and trying to make people happy. You have succeeded in one case, already."

She looked at him with a glance of inquiry.

"What case?" she asked.

"I mean myself — of course. You have made me perfectly happy to-day."

"I am glad," she answered. "I wish you to be always happy."

She spoke thoughtfully, gravely, and gently, and then turned from him a little, and looked through the iron railing of the balcony, down at the deep distance of the valley. She was wondering, and justly, whether during the past hour she had not made a mistake, very cruel to him, in breaking down all at once the barrier of excessive formality which hitherto had stood between them when they met. Words rose to her lips, which with the utmost gentleness should quickly undeceive him, if he had been deceived; but when she looked at him and saw his happy, appealing eyes and his transparent face, her courage was not ready. Perhaps he was dying, as she had been told. She turned again and watched the misty depths.

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"Don Gianluca—" she began, with a little hesitation. But as she spoke there was a footfall in the embrasure.

"What were you going to say?" asked Gianluca, knowing from her tone that she had meant to speak of some grave matter.

"Nothing!" she answered with a little sharpness. "Pray take my chair, Duchessa," she said, turning to the good lady, who had come slowly forward till she stood with her head just out in the air. "It is time for luncheon," she added, as she made the Duchessa sit down, nodded quickly to Gianluca, and went in.

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CHAPTER XXIII.

The regularity of the existence at Muro pleased the old couple, and contributed in a measure to allay their perpetual anxiety about their son and to calm their uneasiness about the whole situation. They were both too wise and too courteous to press the question of marriage upon Veronica under the present circumstances, but they did not feel that they were led too far by their affection for Gianluca when they told each other, in the privacy of the Duchessa's dressing-room, that after what Veronica had now done she was bound, in common self-respect, to marry him. That he would recover from his illness, they never doubted; for, as has been said, the truth had been kept from them, in so far as the prognostications of doctors could be looked upon as worthy of belief. He had certainly been much better since they had brought him to Muro, and they secretly wished that they might all stay where they were until the autumn.

On that first day, Veronica had been on the point of speaking very plainly to Gianluca, intending to tell him once again that he must not be deceived, that she should never marry him, and indeed had no

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intention of ever marrying at all. But she had been interrupted by the coming of the Duchessa; and, as she had not spoken at the first opportunity, she did not purposely create another at once. She was not skilful in such situations. When her directness came into conflict with her sense of delicacy, one or the other gave way; for in serious matters she instinctively hated complicated methods, and though she could be hard and perhaps unnecessarily cruel, yet she would at any time rather be overkind than take refuge in the compromises of what most people call tact. The weaknesses of the strong are like the crevasses in a glacier; they have a general direction, but it is impossible to know certainly beforehand the precise depth or importance of any one of them, nor how far it may lead. The little strengths of weak people are like jagged rocks jutting up in shifting sands and changing tide, the more dangerous to the unwary because they are few and unexpected, and no one can tell where they lie, just below the surface. Many a brave enterprise has gone to pieces upon the stupid, unforeseen obstinacy of a despised weakling.

Veronica, like other people, even the very strongest, had weak points, or moments when some points of her character were weak, which comes to the same thing in result. She dreaded to hurt Gianluca, and since the occasion had passed when she might have made everything clear, and would

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have done so, she found it hard to decide how to act.

Taquisara had told her that the man was dying. If that were true, it could make no difference, whether he believed that she would marry him or not. The thought of his death was terribly painful, and she thrust it from her; for she was not heartless, and in the days that followed their conversation on the balcony, her affection grew to be as real and deep as it could possibly have been for a most dearly loved brother. For her, there had been none of those ties in which such affections live and grow and become parts of life itself. Fatherless, motherless, without brother, or sisters, the girl had grown up not knowing what she had to give, and giving scarcely anything at all of what was best in her. She was reticent and proud, and could never be attached to many people. Bianca had been her friend, in a way, but Bianca's life was mysterious to her, and Pietro Ghisleri had come between the two.

And now, through many months, by the intimacy of correspondence which had suddenly turned to an intimacy of real converse in which she had not been disappointed, she had grown — for it was a true growth — to the power of a most devoted friendship, capable of great and lasting sacrifice. It was a friendship, too, that was, as it were, presanctified by the rising shadow of near death, fore-

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hallowed by the sure suffering of its coming end. It would be hard indeed to cut from Gianluca's heart the one flower of his loving belief.

But then, when she sat beside him on the balcony in the shady hours, and the great wave of life came up to her from the southern valley, she could not believe that he was really to die. And then, she hesitated, and she wished to do what was right and true by him, pain or no pain. Sometimes there was a little colour in his face, and often the deep blue light came into his beautiful eyes. He was to live, then, and she felt that she was cruel, and base, and cowardly to let his thoughts of her grow.

Those were the good days. There were worse ones, when he lay like a dead angel before her, and only in his eyes there was a little life. Then more than once, she gave him the magic of her touch, laid one hand softly upon one of his, or smoothed his silk pillow and arranged the shawl about him. Perhaps she was wrong to do such things, just because she was so young; but when she did them he breathed freely again, and the faint false dawn of a new day that might never brighten rose in the alabaster cheeks.

Once, Taquisara, standing on the great round bastion below, unnoticed by them both under the spreading vine, turned suddenly by chance and looked up through the leaves, and he saw how

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Veronica was bending forward towards his friend and touching one hand of his — for it was not far to see. Taquisara did not look again, but presently he went in, and there was less of unconcern in his handsome bronze face that day, and his dark eyes were harder and colder than they were wont to be.

Veronica liked him, and forgot altogether the unpleasantness which there had been between them. He was as gentle as a woman with Gianluca. He seemed to be strong, too, for on the bad days when his friend could not walk at all, he carried him like a child from room to room. Veronica saw how necessary he was, and he knew it himself, for after his first protest he made no attempt to go away. Gianluca, naturally sensitive and abnormally impressionable, hated to be touched by servants, as some invalids do, and Taquisara's constant presence saved him much suffering, none the less acute because it was imaginary.

At luncheon, at dinner, whenever the Duca and Duchessa were present, Taquisara did his best to help the conversation and always seemed cheerful, unconcerned, and hopeful for Gianluca's recovery. It was on rare occasions, when Veronica found herself alone with him for a few moments, or together with him and Don Teodoro, that the man appeared to her silent, morose, and sometimes almost ill-tempered. He did not again speak rudely in her presence, but she guessed that the unspoken thought

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was constantly in his mind — that, and something else which she could not understand. Daily, hourly perhaps, he was inwardly accusing her of playing with Gianluca, as he had expressed it.

Strange to say, she began to care for his opinion and to wish that he could understand her better; and because he could not, she resented the opinion which she thought he held of her. When she was with him, she felt something which she did not recognize in herself — a desire to attack him, for no reason whatever, and at the same time a wish that he might like her better. Even in her childhood she had never cared very much whether people liked her or not.

One day it rained, — for it was in August, — and from time to time the enormous thunder-storms rolled up out of the valley and crashed and split themselves upon the sharp peak above Muro, and rumbled away to northward up the pass, while the deluge of cold rain descended in their track.

It was afternoon. The windows were all shut, the Duca and Duchessa had disappeared for their daily sleep, as they always did, and Veronica and Taquisara kept Gianluca company in one of the big rooms. He was better than usual, but Veronica found it hard to amuse him, and tried to imagine some diversion for the long hours.

"Can you fence?" she asked suddenly, of Taquisara.

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"Of course — after a fashion," he answered, with a laugh of surprise at the question, which seemed absurd to him.

"Will you fence with me?"

"I? Oh — I remember hearing that you took fencing lessons at the Princess Corleone's. If it amuses you, of course I will."

"I have all my things here," said Veronica. "There are any number of foils, and I got two men's jackets and masks, just in the hope that they might be wanted some day. I am very fond of it, you know. We can move the table away from the middle of the room — it will be something to do. It is dull, when it rains, and Don Gianluca can watch us and tell me when I make mistakes. It will amuse us all."

"Gianluca could give us both lessons," said Taquisara. "He fences beautifully."

"Ah — if I only could!" exclaimed Gianluca, in a tone that hurt Veronica.

The invalid looked down at his long, thin legs and emaciated hands, and he tried to smile bravely.

"You would rather not see us — we will not do it," said Veronica, gently, bending a little to see his face, as she stood near him.

"Oh no! Please do!" he answered. "I have never seen a woman fence — I cannot imagine how you could. It would amuse me very much. Please send for the foils."

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The things were brought, the tables and chairs were moved away, Taquisara drew Gianluca's big easy-chair, with him in it, towards the window, and Veronica put on her leathern jacket and glove, and stood holding her mask in her hand, as she bent over the foils looking for her favourite one. She found it, and came forward, carrying both mask and foil, while Taquisara got ready. Gianluca looked at her and smiled. There was something defiant and warlike about the small, well-poised head, the aquiline features, and the bright eyes. With one foot a little in advance she stood up, straight and daring, in the middle of the room, waiting for her adversary. The grey light of the rainy afternoon gleamed coldly along the steel.

Taquisara took the one of the two masks which fitted him the better, and picked out a foil. He did not think of putting on a jacket to fence with a woman.

"No jacket?" asked Veronica, with a short laugh, as she slipped her mask over her head.

He laughed, too, but said nothing, considering it as a matter of course, and stepping into position he stood before Veronica with lowered foil. She raised hers, saluted him, and then Gianluca, as though they were to fence a bout for a prize. Taquisara did the same.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, in surprise, as both were about to fall into guard. "Are you left-handed?"

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"Yes — did you never notice it?" She laughed again, as her foil played upon his for a second. "Now then!" she cried.

Taquisara was not an exceptionally good fencer, and had spent very little time in the study of the art. He was bold, quick, and somewhat reckless, and in two or three slight affairs in which, like most men of his society in the south, he had been unavoidably engaged, he had wounded his adversaries rather by surprise and indifference to his own safety, than by any superior skill. He had expected that Veronica would make a few conventional passes and parries, and grow tired of the sport in a few minutes. To his astonishment, he saw in a moment that she could really fence fairly well, while the fact of being left-handed gave her a great advantage, even against an otherwise superior adversary. He had of course intended and expected only to defend himself without ever really attacking, as men generally do when they fence with women. But he was mistaken in supposing that this was what Veronica wanted.

She tried his wrist once or twice and played a little, feeling her way. Then there was a quick flash, a disengagement, a feint, a lunge that was like a man's, and as her long left arm shot out like lightning, her foil bent nearly double, with the button full on his breast. She stepped back, and he heard her short laugh again, followed by

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Gianluca's, and he laughed, too, somewhat disconcerted.

"I took you by surprise," she said. "You had better put on a jacket — it is just as well."

"Oh no — but you can really fence! I had no idea. I shall be more careful. Try again!"

They engaged once more, and Taquisara was cautious. His defence did not compare with his attack, and he could not take the offensive in earnest. He parried her quick thrusts with some difficulty, and presently she touched him on the arm.

"Why do you not attack me?" she asked impatiently. "You need not be afraid — I can defend myself pretty well."

He did not altogether like to lunge as though he were fencing with a man, and his hesitation gave her a still greater advantage. She felt an unaccountable delight in attacking him furiously, and in her excitement she uttered sharp little cries when she touched him, as she did more than once. She felt that she had never fenced so well in her life, and she was glad that she should do better against him than against Bianca or her fencing-master. There was a strange delight in it. He, on his part, did his best at defence, but he could not bring himself to a real attack. He tried to disarm her, by sheer strength, but he failed utterly. Her wrist was more supple than the steel foil itself, and she was left-handed.

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It was rather wild play, but it was amusing to watch, and Gianluca looked on with delighted appreciation. She was so slight and graceful, and yet so quick and strong. As for Taquisara, he was glad when she drew back, took her mask from her face, and said that it was enough.

"You ought to know that you can hardly ever disarm a left-handed person when you are engaged in carte," observed Gianluca, looking at Taquisara.

Though he had never been in a quarrel in his life, he had been passionately fond of fencing, and in his real interest in what he had seen he did not even think of complimenting Veronica. She was keen enough to feel that his scientific remark was better than any flattery.

Taquisara shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"Donna Veronica fences like a man," he said. "And I am not very good at it either. She would have killed me two or three times!"

"You never really attacked me," she answered, flushed and happy. "By the by," she added, seeing that he was looking over the other foils, "one of those is sharp — the one with the green hilt — be careful not to take it by mistake if we fence again, for you might really kill me."

"How did it come here?" he asked, taking up the one she indicated.

"It was lying about at the Princess Corleone's. I took it by mistake, I suppose, with my things.

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I believe that Signor Ghisleri brought it to show her, one day. I think he said it had been used."

She threw off her leathern jacket, and tossed the other things aside.

"Let us fence a little every day," she said. "That is, if you will really fence, instead of playing with me."

"I am certainly not able to play with you," he answered. "And I shall wear a jacket next time."

"You are wonderful," said Gianluca, still watching her with admiration.

The storm had passed, and the rain was over. Before long the Duca and Duchessa would appear for tea, and Taquisara said that he would go for a walk. Veronica rang and had the room set in order again, and sat down by Gianluca. The exercise had done her good, and she still felt that fierce little satisfaction at having fought with Taquisara. There was an unwonted colour in her cheeks, and her brown hair had been somewhat ruffled by the mask. Her hands were warm, and tingled, and she felt intensely alive. It had been pleasant, for once, to put out all her energy in something like a real struggle.

Little by little her sensations wore off, and she was quite quiet again, but the recollection of them remained and made her wish to renew them every day.

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"You are wonderful," Gianluca repeated, when they had talked of other things for a while. "Taquisara is not a fencing-master, but he is as good as most men, and better than many. You gave him trouble, I could see. It was all he could do to defend himself against you, sometimes."

"Did it amuse you to watch us?" asked Veronica.

"Yes — of course!"

"Then we will do it again, every day. I am glad of a little practice, and it will not hurt him either. A descendant of Tancred ought to fence better than that! I suppose that your mother would be horrified."

"She might be a little surprised."

"Shall we tell her?"

"Not unless we are obliged to," answered Gianluca, with a smile. "We do not tell her everything."

"No," said Veronica, acquiescing rather thoughtfully.

Gianluca was in that state in which there is a delight in having little, harmless secrets from the world in common with one much loved, but not yet wholly won, and each small secrecy was to the bond that held him what the silver threads are to Damascus steel, welded into the whole that the blade may bend double without breaking. But to Veronica it was different; for she guessed instinctively how he looked upon such trifles, and she did

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not wish them to multiply unduly. Each one was a sting to her conscience.

"I hate secrets," she said gravely, after a pause. "Let us tell her. It is much better."

"As you like," answered Gianluca, with a little disappointment, which she did not fail to notice.

"You think that she will be scandalized? And that we shall not fence any more? Why? I am sure, if she could see us, she would think it very proper. It is not improper, is it?" She asked the last question anxiously, as though in an afterthought.

"Improper? No! How absurd! If everything that is unusual were to be considered improper, our writing to each other would be improper, too. But we kept it a secret, all the same. I cannot imagine talking about it. For me — everything that belongs to you is a secret."

Veronica leaned back in her chair, and her face grew still more grave, but she did not answer. The struggle had begun again, and the hesitation. Should she tell him, once for all, that she really never could love him? Should she leave him the illusion he loved so well? Was he to die, or was he to live? The answer to each question seemed to lie in the query of the next. He spoke again before she broke the silence.

"Do you not feel that — a little — not as I do,

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but just a little, about me?" he asked in a voice not timid, but very soft.

"No," she answered sadly. "Not as you do. No; it is quite different."

She did not look at him at once, for she was almost afraid to meet his eyes, but she heard him catch his breath, as though to strangle a sigh by main force, and his head moved on the cushion.

She had begun to hurt him.

"I thought you might," he said, faintly but steadily. "I almost thought you did."

"No," she repeated, with ever-increasing gentleness. "No. Do not think that — please do not!"

He said nothing, but again he moved his head. Then, seeing that the moment had come, and that she must face it with truth or lie to him while he lived, she turned her face bravely towards him, to tell him all her heart.

"You are the only real friend I have in the world," she said. "But I can never love you — never, Gianluca — never. It is not in me. There is no one in the whole world for whom I care as I do for you. I cannot imagine anything that I could not do for your sake. But not love — not love. That is something else. I do not know what it means. You could make me understand anything but that. Oh — why must I say it, when it is so hard to say?"

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His face seemed cut, as a mask of pain, in alabaster, and the appealing, hungry eyes waited for each fresh hurt.

"You made me think that you might love me," he said, the slow words hardly forming themselves on his dry lips.

"Then God forgive me!" she cried, clasping her hands and bending her face over them. "And yet — and yet I knew it. I felt it. I meant to tell you, if you did not know! I only wished not to hurt you — it is so hard to say."

"Yes," he answered, scarcely above his breath. "I see it is," he added, after a long time.

As he lay in the deep chair, he turned his face from her, on the cushion, till she could not see his eyes, and then was quite still. It would have been easier if he had reproached her vehemently, if he had turned and tried to win her again, and poured out his heart full of love. But he lay there, like a dead angel, with his face turned from her, hardly breathing.

"I have been cowardly, and base, and bad!" she cried, bending over her clasped hands, and speaking to herself. "I should have said it — I said it long ago, at Bianca's, and I should have said it again — but I was afraid — afraid — oh! afraid!"

Her low voice trembled in anger against herself, in pity for him, in sorrow for them both. She looked up and saw him still motionless. It was

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as though she had killed him and were sitting beside his body. But he still lived, and might live. For one instant she felt a mad impulse to give him her life, to marry him, not loving him, to save him if she could, to atone for what she had done. But a horrible under-thought told her that it would be but gambling for her freedom with his existence, and that if she did it, she should do it because she felt that he must surely die. Even her simplicity seemed gone. She looked again; he had not moved.

She threw herself upon her knees, beside his great chair, her clasped hands on his thin shoulder, in a sort of agony of despair.

"Speak to me!" she cried. "Forgive me — say that I have not killed you — Gianluca — dear!"

One shadowy hand of his was lifted, and touched hers. It was as cold as though it had lain dead in the dew. She took it quickly and held it fast. He did not turn his head.

"It has been my life," he said, "my whole life."

He did not try to draw away his hand, but let her hold it, if she would. There was still magic in her touch.

"Forgive me!" she repeated more softly, and her cheek touched the arm of the chair. "Forgive me!"

At last he turned his face very wearily and slowly

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on the brown silk cushion, and looked at her bent head. Instinctively she raised her hot eyes.

"Forgive you?" He spoke very sorrowfully. "I love you. What is there to forgive? It is not your fault — "

"It is — it is!" she cried, speaking into his sad eyes for forgiveness, with all her soul.

"I shall die — but it is not your fault," he answered, and he sank back, for he had raised himself a little. "It is not your fault," he repeated. "Do not ask me to forgive you. Perhaps I should have lived longer — I do not know, for I only lived for you. No — I am quiet now. I can speak better than I could. You must not think that you have killed me, if I die. Men live through worse, but not men like me, perhaps. Something else is killing me slowly, but they will not tell me what it is. Never mind. It will do as well without a name, and if I get well, it needs none. After all, I am not dead yet, and while I am alive, I can love you. You have been all to me. If you had loved me, I should have had more than all the world, and that would have been too much. If I deceived myself, loving you as I did, — as I do, — it is not your fault, Veronica. It is not your fault. There was a time last year, when I would have done anything, given everything, life and all, for one of a thousand words you have written and said to me since then — when I would have committed crimes

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for the touch of this little hand. Do you see? It is all my fault. That is what I wanted you to understand."

He had said all he could, and his breath came with an effort at the last. But his lips smiled bravely as he looked at her, still kneeling by his side. Then he seemed to realize that she should not be there.

"Get up, dear," he said, with failing voice. "You must not kneel — some one might come — they would think — that you meant — something."

His lids quivered and closed, and his lips trembled oddly. She felt his hand relax, and she thought that he was gone. Instantly she sprang to her feet beside him, and lifted his head, her face full of the horror that goes before the wave of pain for those one loves. But he had not even fainted. He opened his eyes, and smiled, and tried to speak again, but could not.

Veronica's lips moved, too, as she stood there, supporting him a little with her arm and stiffened with terror for his life. But she could not speak either. She watched his face with most intense anxiety. Again and again, he opened his eyes, and saw her, and he felt her arm under him.

"It is nothing," he said suddenly. "I was a little faint."

She drew away her arm with a deep breath of relief, and he sighed when it was gone. But

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neither of them spoke. Veronica rang, and sent for his favourite wine, and he drank a little of it. Then she sat down beside him, where she had sat before, and the room was very still.

It was hot, too, for no one had opened the window since it had stopped raining. Veronica rose and undid the fastenings and threw back the glass, and the cool air rushed in, laden with the sweet smell of the wet earth. As she came back, she saw that his eyes followed all her movements, gravely, as a sick child watches its nurse moving about its room. There was no reproach in their look, but they were still fixed on her, when she sat down again by his side.

"Veronica," said the faint, far voice, presently. "May I ask you one question, that I have no right to ask?"

"Anything," she answered. "And you have the right to ask anything."

"No — not this. Do you love another man?"

The still blue eyes widened, in earnestness.

"No, Gianluca. No — by the truth of God — no living man!"

"Nor one dead?" His tone sank almost to a whisper, and still his eyes were wide for her answer.

A faint and tender light came into her face, so faint, so far reflected from an infinite somewhere, that only such eyes as his could have seen it.

"There was Bosio," she said softly. "He spoke

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to me the night he died — I could have married him — I should have loved him — perhaps."

If the little phrases were broken, it was not by hesitation; it seemed rather as though what they meant must find each memory to have meaning, one by one, and word by word — and finding, wondered at what had once been true.

And Gianluca smiled, as he lay still, and the lids of his eyes closed peacefully and naturally, opening again with another look. He was too weak to be surprised by what he had only vaguely guessed, from some word she had let fall, but he knew well enough, from her voice and face, that she had never loved Bosio Macomer, nor any other man, dead or living. And Hope, that is ever last to leave a breaking heart, nestled back into her own sweet place, breathing soft things of love, and life, and golden years to be.

"Thank you," he said. "I should not have asked you. It was kind to answer."

They did not speak again, and presently the door opened. The old Duca held it back with a stately bow, and the Duchessa swept into the room with that sort of uncertain swaying motion, which is all that weakness leaves of grace. And the Duca shuffled in after her, and closed the door most precisely, for he was a precise old man.

"I thought it was time for tea, my dear," said the Duchessa. "We have had such a good sleep!"

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CHAPTER XXIV.

THOUGH Gianluca had seemed to gain strength during the first week of his stay at Muro, he appeared to lose it even more rapidly after that memorable afternoon. It was not that he lost heart and control of courage; on the contrary, he spoke all at once more hopefully, and grew most particular in the carrying out of each detail of the day, precisely in the manner prescribed by the doctors. He forced himself to eat, he did his best to sleep a certain number of hours, he made Taquisara carry him out into the air and back again at fixed times, in order that the extreme regularity of his life might help his recovery if possible. But all this was of no use. It had seemed inconceivable that he should grow more thin, and yet his face and throat and hands shrunk day by day. He could not use his legs at all, now, and he told no one that he had hardly any sensation in them.

The Duchessa prayed for her son, always in her own room and sometimes in the church, whither she went often alone in the afternoon, and sometimes accompanied by her husband. She even curtailed her daily siesta in order to have more time

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for prayer. No doubt, she would have given anything in the world for Gianluca, but she had very little else to give, beyond that sacrifice, which did not seem small or laughable to her. The Duca said little, but often shook his head, unexpectedly, and his weak eyes were watery. He sometimes walked twenty-five times round the top of the big lower bastion, under the vines that grew upon the trellis over it, before the midday breakfast, while the Duchessa was at her devotions. At every round, when he came to the point fronting the valley he paused a moment and repeated very much the same words each time.

"My poor son! My poor Gianluca!" he said, and then shuffled round the bastion again.

Taquisara scarcely left the sick man's side except when Gianluca could be alone with Veronica. He was evidently very anxious, though his face betrayed little of what he felt. He knew it, and was glad that nature had given him that bronze-like colour, which could hardly change at all. When the whole party were together, he talked; he talked when he was alone with Gianluca; but when he was with Gianluca and Veronica he spoke in monosyllables. Once she noticed that he was biting his lip nervously, just as he turned away his face.

Though Gianluca was worse, without doubt, he insisted that there should be no change in his way of spending the day. To amuse him, Veronica and

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Taquisara fenced a little of an afternoon. But the Sicilian had no heart in it, and evidently did not care whether Veronica touched him or not, and his indifference annoyed her, so that she sometimes worked herself into little furies of attack, and he, rather than really attack her in return and oppose his strength, broke ground and let himself be driven back across the room.

"Some day I shall take the foil with the green hilt," laughed Veronica. "Then you will really take the trouble to fight me."

The foil with the green hilt was the sharp one which had got among the others by mistake. Taquisara smiled indifferently.

"My life is at your service," he said, in a tone that seemed a little sarcastic.

"Keep it for those who need it," she answered, laughing again, and glancing at Gianluca.

Her tone was a little scornful, too, and Gianluca watched them both with some surprise. Almost any one would have thought that they disliked each other, but such a possibility had never struck him before. He would have admitted that Veronica might not like Taquisara, but that any one in the world should not like Veronica was beyond his comprehension. He spoke to his friend about it when they were alone.

"What is the matter between you and Donna Veronica?" he asked that evening, before dinner.

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"Nothing," answered Taquisara, stopping in his walk. "What do you mean."

"I think you dislike her," said Gianluca.

"I?" The Sicilian's strong voice rang in the room. "No," he added quietly, and recovering instantly from his astonishment. "I do not dislike her. What makes you think that I do?"

"Little things. You seem so silent and out of temper when she is in the room. To-day when she was laughing about the pointed foil you answered her sarcastically. Many little things make me think that you do not like her."

"You are mistaken," said Taquisara, gravely. "I like Donna Veronica very much. Indeed, I always did, ever since I first saw her. I am sorry that my manner should have given you a wrong impression. I always feel that I am in the way when I am with you two."

"You are never in the way," answered Gianluca.

After that, Taquisara was very careful, but more than ever he did his best not to remain as a third when the Duca and Duchessa were away, and Veronica and Gianluca could be together. The fencing alone was inevitable, and he hated it, though he went through it with a good grace almost every day, since Veronica seemed so unreasonably fond of the exercise.

She and Gianluca did not refer to what had hap-

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pened, and to what had been said, when she had told him the truth. She, on her part, felt that she had done right, and that it was the sort of right which need not be done again. But he, poor man, was not so wholly undeceived as she thought him to be. Since she loved no one else, he could still hope that she might love him.

Yet he felt his life slipping from him, and he made desperate efforts to get well, insisting upon every detail of his invalid existence as though each several minute of the day had a healing virtue which he must not lose. He was sure that his chance of winning the woman he loved lay in living to win her, and he grappled his soul to his frail body with every thrill of energy that his dying nerve had left, with all the tense moral grip that love and despair can give. And yet it seemed hopeless, for his strength sank daily. At last he could not even sit up at table, and remained lying in his low chair, while the others ate their meals hastily in order not to leave him long alone.

The doctor came, a clever young man, whom Veronica had procured for the good of the village. He shook his head, though he tried to speak cheerfully to Gianluca's father and mother. But he advised them to send for the great authority whom they had consulted in Naples, and under whom he himself had studied. Veronica spoke with him in an outer room.

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"I fear that he cannot live, but I am not infallible," he said.

"How long will he live, if he is going to die?" asked Veronica, pale and quiet.

"Do not ask me — it is guess-work," answered the young doctor. "I think he may live a fortnight. He is practically paralyzed from his waist downwards — it is almost complete. What he eats does not nourish him."

"What has caused this?"

The doctor shrugged his shoulders, smiled faintly, and made a gesture which in the south signifies the inevitable.

"It is a decayed race," he said; "a family too old — there is no more blood in them — what shall I say?"

"I do not believe that has anything to do with it," replied Veronica, rather proudly. "The Serra are as old as they. Did you see that gentleman who is Don Gianluca's friend? He is descended from Tancred."

"It is other blood," said the doctor.

He went away, and the great physician who lived in Naples was sent for at once. A carriage went down to Eboli to meet him. He came, looked, asked questions, and shook his head, very much as his pupil had done. He stayed a night, and when it was late, Veronica and Taquisara were alone with him. He was a fat man, with enormous

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shoulders and very short legs, and a round face and dreamy eyes set too low for proportion of feature. Taquisara thought that he was like a turtle standing on its hind flippers, preternaturally endowed with a hemispherical black stomach, and a large watch chain; but the idea did not seem comic to him, for he was in no humour to be amused at anything.

The professor — for he was one — talked long and learnedly, using a number of Latin words with edifying terminations. In spite of this, however, he was not without common sense.

"I have known people to recover when they seemed to have no chance at all," he said.

"But you do not expect him to live?" asked Taquisara, pressing him.

"It is a desperate case," answered the physician.

Being very fat, and having travelled all day, he went to bed. Veronica remained alone in the drawing-room with Taquisara. The latter slowly walked up and down between two opposite doors. Veronica kept her seat, her head bent, listening to his regular footsteps.

"Donna Veronica —" he stopped.

"Yes," she answered, not looking up, but starting slightly at the sound of his voice. "What do you wish to say?"

"You know that I have not always been fortunate in what I have said to you, and that makes me

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hesitate to speak now. But it seems to me that, as Gianluca is really in the care of us two —"

"Well?" Still she did not turn to him, though he paused awkwardly, and began to walk again.

"Gianluca asked me the other day whether I disliked you," he said.

"Well? Do you?" Her tone was unnaturally cold, even to her own ears.

He stood still on the other side of the table, looking towards her.

"No," he said, as though he were making an effort. "If he asked me the question, it must be that I have behaved rudely to you before him. Have I?"

"I have not noticed it," answered Veronica, as coldly as before.

"It would certainly not have been intentional, if there had been anything to notice. If I speak of it now, it is because Gianluca spoke to me, and because, if we are to talk about him, the way must be clear. You say that it is? May I go on?"

Veronica did not answer at once. Then she rose slowly, turned, and stood before the low, long chimneypiece.

"Why should we talk about him at all?" she asked, at length determining what to say. "We shall not agree, and we can only repeat what we have both said before now. It can be of no use."

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"I have something more to say," replied Taquisara.

"Yes. There may be more to be said, that may be better not said. I know what it is. You once accused me of playing with him. You said it rudely and roughly, but I have forgiven you for saying it. You would have more reason for saying it now than you had then, and I should be less angry. You have a better right to speak, and I have less right to defend myself. But I will speak for you. I am not afraid."

"No. That is the last thing any one could say of you!"

"Or of you, perhaps," she said, more kindly, and it was the first word of appreciation she had ever given him. "We are neither of us cowards. That is why I am willing to tell you what I think of myself. It is almost what you think of me — that I have done a thousand things which might make Don Gianluca, and his father and mother, too, believe that if he recovers I mean to marry him. But you think me a heartless woman. I am not. There are things which you neither know, nor could understand if you knew them. I will ask you only one question. Is there any imaginable reason why I should wish to hurt him?"

"None that I can guess," answered Taquisara, looking into her eyes.

"Then you must understand what I have done.

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Out of too much friendship I have made a great mistake. What you can never understand, I suppose, is, that I can feel for him what you do — just that, and no more — or more of that, perhaps, and nothing else. A woman can be a man's friend, as well as a man can. I never played with him — as you call it — though you have enough right to say it. I told him from the first that I could never marry him. I told him so again on the day when we had first fenced, and you went to walk after the rain."

"That is why he has been worse, since then. It began that very evening."

"Yes. I know it. Do you think I do not reproach myself for having gone so far that I had to speak? Indeed, indeed, I do, more than you know. But what am I to do? He cannot go away, ill as he is. I cannot leave you all here. And then, I would not leave him, if I could. He is more to me than I can ever tell you — I would give my right hand for his life. Would you have me marry him, knowing that I can never love him? Is that what you would have me do?"

Taquisara was silent for a moment, looking earnestly at her, and he bit his lip a little.

"Yes," he said. "That is what you should do. It is all you can do, to try and save his life."

The moment he had spoken he turned from her and began to walk up and down again.

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"Do you know what you are asking?" Veronica followed him with her eyes.

"It is a sacrifice," he said, pursuing his walk and not glancing at her. "It is to give your life for his. I know it. But you can hardly give him more than he has given you — or you have taken from him. Yes — I know what the doctors say, that it is a disease which is known and understood. No doubt it is. But diseases of that sort may remain latent for a lifetime, unless something determines them. Until they have gone too far, they may be overcome. If he had not lived for weeks in a state of nervous tension that would almost make a strong man ill, he would not be in such a condition now. If he had never known you, he might have been as well as he ever was — he might have been well for twenty or thirty years, before it attacked him. It is not all your fault, but a part of it is. Take your friendship, and your mistakes, together — your wish that he may live, and your responsibility if he dies — two motives are better than one, when the one is not strong enough. You have two, and good ones. Marry him, Donna Veronica — marry him and save his life, if you can, and your own remorse if he dies. Let me go to him now — he is not asleep — let me tell him that you have changed your mind, or made up your mind — that you love him, after all —"

"Please do not go on," said Veronica, drawing

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back a little, till she leaned against the mantelpiece.

He had placed himself in front of her before he had finished speaking. He was excited, vehement, and not eloquent—like a man driven to bay by a crowd to argue a question in which he had no conviction, but which concerns his life. He stopped speaking when she interrupted him, and he seemed to be waiting for her to say more. She had drawn herself up a little proudly, with her head high.

"You hurt me," she said, breaking the silence, and hardly knowing why she said the words.

"Do you think it costs me nothing?" he asked, in a low voice.

His eyes burned strangely in the lamplight. But he turned away quickly, to resume his walk. She could not help asking him a question.

"Why should it cost you anything? You are speaking for your friend — but I — "

She did not finish the sentence, for it seemed to her selfish to throw her right to happiness into the scale against Gianluca's life. But she could not understand him.

"It is hard to do, for all that," he answered indistinctly. "I have said too much," he continued, stopping before her. "I meant to do the best I could. Perhaps I should have said nothing. This is no time to stop at trifles. The man is dying, and I have a right to say that I believe you might save

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his life — and a right to beg you to try. You have the right to refuse, to question, to doubt — all rights that are a woman's in such a case. As for me — there is no question of me in all this. Since I must be here for him, since I have displeased you from the first, since you do not like me, look upon me as a necessary evil, do not consider my existence, think of me as a man who loves your best friend and is giving all he has — to save him."

"All you have," repeated Veronica, thoughtfully, but without a question.

"Yes!" he exclaimed.

The single word was spoken with a sort of passion, as though it meant much to him. She liked him better now than when he walked up and down, giving her incoherent advice. Whatever he might mean, it was something which had power to move him.

"You are mistaken," she said. "I like you very much."

"You — Princess!" His surprise was genuine. "You have not made me think so," he added in a tone of wonder.

"Nor have you made me think that you liked me," she answered.

"Gianluca thought I did not," said Taquisara, slowly, as though speaking to himself.

Veronica smiled.

"When I first knew you, when we talked

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together at the villa on that morning before Christmas, I liked you better than him," she said.

He started sharply.

"Please —" He checked himself almost before the one word had escaped his lips.

"Please — what?" she asked, naturally enough.

"Nothing."

His face quickened as he walked again, and she watched him curiously.

"As friends of one friend, we must be friends," she said, after a pause. "We have spoken frankly to-night, both of us. It is much better. With his life between us we can say things, perhaps, which neither of us would have said before. You are doing all you can. You ask me to do more than I can — I think. As for his life — let us not talk of what may happen. I think of it enough, as it is."

She turned as she spoke the last words, for she did not trust her face. But he heard the true note of sorrow in her tone.

"Is it possible that you do not love him a little?" he asked, in a low voice.

"It is true," she answered mechanically, as though hearing him in a dream. "I could never love him."

Then, all at once she straightened herself and left the chimneypiece.

"We must not talk of these things any more,"

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she said. "Good night. We understand each other, do we not?"

She held out her hand to him, which she very rarely did. He took it quietly.

"I understand you — yes," he said.

She looked at him a moment longer, smiled faintly, and then left the room. After she was gone, he sat down in the chair she had occupied, crossed one knee over the other, folded his hands, and stared at the carpet. He sat there for a long time, motionless, as though absorbed in the study of a difficult problem. But his expression did not change, and he did not speak aloud to himself as some men do when they are alone and in great trouble, as he was then. He was not a man of theatrical instincts, nor, indeed, of any great imagination. Least of all was he given to anything like self-examination, or arguing with his conscience. He was exceedingly simple in nature. He either loved or hated, either respected or was indifferent or despised altogether, with no half-measures nor compromises.

Just then he was merely revolving the situation in his mind, and trying to see some way of escaping from it, without abandoning his friend. But no way occurred to him which did not look cowardly, and when he rose from his seat, he had made up his mind to face his troubles as well as he could, since he could not avoid them.

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He went to Gianluca's room before he went to bed. A small light burned behind a shade in a corner, and at first he could barely see the white face on the white pillow. The sick man lay sound asleep, breathing almost inaudibly, one light hand lying upon the coverlet, the other hidden. Gradually, as Taquisara looked, his eyes became accustomed to the light, and he gazed earnestly at his sleeping friend. He saw the dark rings come out beneath the drooping lids, and the paleness of the parted lips, and the terrible emaciation of the thin hand.

But there was life still, and hope. Hope that the man might still live and stand among men, hope that he might yet marry Veronica Serra—and be happy. In the half-darkness, Taquisara set his teeth, biting hard, as though he would have bitten through iron, lest a sharp breath should escape him and disturb the sleeper's rest.

That frail thing, that ghost, that airy remnant of a man, lay there, alive in name, between Taquisara and the mere right to think of his own happiness; and next to the reality of the shadow of his dream, he loved best on earth this shadow of reality that would not die. For he loved Veronica with all his heart, and after her, Gianluca della Spina. Above both stood honour.

He knew that he was loyal and true as he stood there, and that there was not in the inmost inward heart of him a mean, double-faced wish that his

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friend might die there, peacefully, and leave to the winning of the strong what the weak had wooed in vain. He had spoken the truth when he had said that for his friend's life he was giving all he had, when he did his best to persuade Veronica that she must marry the dying man, in the bare hope of saving him while there was yet time. He had done his best, though it was no wonder that there was no conviction, but only vehemence, in his tone. It had been different on that day, now long ago, when he had first spoken for Gianluca in the garden. He had not loved her then. She had been no more to him than any other woman. But even on that day, when he had left her, he had half guessed that he might love her if opportunity gave possibility the right of way. He had guessed it, and even to guess it was to fear it, for Gianluca's sake. He was not quixotic. Had he been first, death or life, he would not have given another room at her side, had that or that man been twenty times his friend or his brother. Even if it had been a little otherwise, if Gianluca had not confided in him from the beginning, and had stood out as any other suitor for her hand, Taquisara, as he loved her now, would hardly have drawn back because his friend had been before him. But Gianluca had come to him, told him all, asked his advice, taken his help — all that, when Veronica had still been nothing to Taquisara — less than nothing, in a way, because she was such a

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great heiress, and he would have hesitated before asking for her hand, being but a poor Sicilian gentleman of good repute, few acres, and old blood.

He was loyal to the core of his sound soul. Whatever became of him, Gianluca was to be first in his actions, wherever Veronica might stand in his heart, and he had the strength to do all that he meant to do. He would do it. He knew that he should do it, and he was glad, for his honour, that he could do it.

He had avoided all meetings, as much as possible, from the first, going rarely to Bianca's house, and then not talking with Veronica when he could help it. For each time that he saw her, he felt that soft mystery of attraction in which great passion begins; that something which touches and draws gently on, and presses and draws again more gently, yet with stronger power, growing great on nothings by day and night, till it drives the senses slowly mad, and overtops the soul, and pricks, then goads, then drives — then, at the last, tears men up like straws in its enormous arms, rising on sudden wings to outstrip wind and whirlwind in the wild race that ends in death or blinding joy, or reckless ruin of honour, worse than any death.

He had felt the growing danger at every one of their few meetings, and, being simple, he mistrusted himself to be what other men were. But in that, he was not like the many. He was not of the kind

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and temper to break down in loyalty, and he could still bear much more. Under strong pressure, he had come with Gianluca to the gates of Muro, and he had done his best to get away at once. Fate had been against him. He was still strong, and could face fate alone. He did not pine, and waste bodily, as Gianluca had done. But he turned his eyes away when he could, and spent his hours out of danger when he might, waiting for the moment when he should be free to go and live his own life alone, husbanding the strength which was not lacking in him, setting his teeth hard to bear the pain, — a simple, brave, and loyal man, caught in fate's grip, but silently unyielding to the last.

It was his nature to suffer without complaint, when he must suffer at all. No one can tell whether those feel pain most who show least what they feel. The measure of pain is always man, and no man can really be measured except by himself. We often believe that they who utter no cry are the most badly hurt, perhaps because silence has suggestion in it, and noise has none. No one knows the truth. No one has stood in the fire that scorches his brother's soul, to tell us which can suffer the more.

Taquisara lay long awake that night, and every word that had passed between Veronica and him came back to his thoughts.

More than once he rose and, crossing the intermediate room, went to Gianluca's side. Once the

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latter was awake, still half dreaming, and looked up wonderingly into his friend's eyes. He scarcely knew that he spoke, as his lips moved.

"I am going to die," he said, in a far-off tone.

Taquisara bent over him quickly, trying to smile.

"Nonsense — no — no!" he said cheerfully. "You have been dreaming — you are better."

"Yes — I am dreaming — let me sleep," answered the sick man, hardly articulating the words.

And in a moment, he was asleep again. Taquisara listened to his breathing, bending down a moment longer. Then he went softly away. He himself slept a little, but it seemed long before the morning broke.

When it was broad daylight, Gianluca seemed better, for the deep sleep had refreshed him. It was still very early, when the professor appeared and paid him a long visit, asking a few questions at first and then suddenly beginning to talk of politics and the public news. Taquisara left the room with him, and they stood together in Gianluca's sitting-room.

"He is better, is he not?" asked the Sicilian, eagerly.

To his surprise the doctor shook his head and was silent a long time.

"I know nothing," he said, at last. "Nobody knows anything. Surgery is a fine art, but medicine is witchcraft, or little better. You see, I

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speak frankly. I can only give you my experience, and that may be worth something. I have seen two cases of this kind in which, when the change came, the patients partially recovered, and lived for several years, paralyzed downwards from the point in the spine where the disease begins. I have seen several cases where death has resulted rather suddenly."

"And do you see a change coming?"

"Yes. It has begun already. Is he a devout man?"

"A religious man, at all events," answered Taquisara, gravely.

"Then, if he wishes to see a priest, it would be as well to send for one this morning. But if he wishes to be moved as usual, and dressed, let him have his way. Do not frighten him, if you can help it. No moral shock can do any good. I leave it to you. It is of no use to tell his father and mother. They are here, and you will see if he is worse. I suppose you know that he suffers great pain when he is moved?"

"No!" said Taquisara, anxiously. "I did not know it. I sometimes hear him draw his breath sharply once or twice — but he never complains. I thought it hurt him a little."

"It is agony," said the doctor. "He must be a very brave man."

The professor seemed much impressed by what Taquisara had said.

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CHAPTER XXV.

TAQUISARA went immediately to find Don Teodoro, who was generally at home at that hour, in his little house just opposite the castle gate. He found him with his silver spectacles pushed up to the top of his head, his long nose buried in a musty volume, a cup of untasted coffee at his elbow, absorbed in study. The small room was filled with books, old and new, and smelt of them. As Taquisara entered, the old priest looked up, screwing his lids together in the attempt to recognize his visitor without using his spectacles. He took him for the syndic of Muro, a respectable countryman of fifty years, come to consult with him about some public matters.

"Be seated," he said. "If you will pardon me, for a moment — I was just — "

In an instant his nose almost touched the page again, and he did not complete the sentence, before he was lost in study once more. Taquisara sat down upon the only chair there was and waited a few moments, not realizing that he had not been recognized. But the priest forgot his existence immediately and if not disturbed would probably have gone on reading till noon.

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"Don Teodoro!" said Taquisara, rousing him. "Pray excuse me —"

The old man looked up suddenly, with an exclamation of surprise.

"Dear me!" he cried. "Are you there, Baron? I beg your pardon. I think I took you for some one else."

He drew his spectacles down to the level of his eyes, and let the big book fall back upon the table.

"Our friend is very ill," said Taquisara, gravely. "That is why I have come to disturb you."

He told the priest what the doctor had said about Gianluca's condition. Don Teodoro listened with an expression of concern and anxiety, for he had become fond of the sick man during the past weeks, and Gianluca liked him, too. Almost every day they talked together, and the refined taste and sincere love of literature of the younger man delighted in the profound learning of the old student, while the latter found a rare pleasure in speaking of his favourite occupations to such an appreciative listener.

"The fact is," Taquisara concluded, "though I have not much faith in doctors, I really believe that he may die at any moment. You know what kind of man he is. Go and sit with him after luncheon to-day — or before — the sooner, the better. Do not frighten him — do not tell him that I have spoken to you about his condition. I believe that

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he knows it himself, and if he is alone with you for some time, and you speak of the uncertainty of life, as a priest can, he will probably himself propose to make his confession. You understand those things, Don Teodoro — it is your business. It is our business to give you a chance."

"Yes — yes," answered the old man. "I daresay you are right. I suppose that is what I should do." There was a reluctance in his voice which surprised Taquisara.

"You do not seem convinced," said the latter.

"I wish there were another priest here," replied Don Teodoro, thoughtfully, and his clear eyes looked away, avoiding the other's direct glance.

"Why?" inquired the Sicilian, with increasing astonishment.

"It is a painful office to perform for a friend." The curate looked down now, and fingered the corner of his old book, in evident hesitation. "It is quite another thing to assist the poor."

"I do not understand you," said Taquisara. "I suppose that priests have especial sensibilities of their own —"

"Sometimes — sometimes," interrupted Don Teodoro, as though speaking to himself. "Yes — I have especial sensibilities."

"It cannot be helped," answered Taquisara, in a tone that had something of authority in it. "Of course we laymen do not appreciate those nice ques-

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tions. A man is dying. He wants a priest. It is your place to go to him, whether he is your own father, or a swineherd. You are alone here, and you have no choice."

"Yes, I am alone. I wish I were not. I wish that the princess would get me an assistant."

"It will be best if you come to the castle in about an hour," said Taquisara, paying no attention to Don Teodoro's last remark. "By that time Gianluca will be in his sitting-room, and I shall be with him. The Duca and Duchessa will be out for their walk, for the weather is cool and fine, and they do not know of his imminent danger. Come in without warning, as though you had just come to pay him a visit of a quarter of an hour. You have done the same thing before. I will go away after five minutes and leave you together. Donna Veronica will not interrupt you."

"Very well," replied the priest, in a tone that was still reluctant. "If it must be, it must be."

Taquisara looked at him curiously and went away to arrange matters as he proposed. But Don Teodoro, though he wore his spectacles, with the help of which he really could see very well, did not notice the young man's glance of curiosity, as he went with him to the door, and carefully fastened it after him, which was an unusual proceeding on his part; for though he lived quite alone, the poor people never found that door locked by

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day or night. An old woman came every day to do the little household work that was necessary, and to cook something for him, when he ate at home. But to-day, for once, he drew the rusty old bolt across, before he went back to his study. He did nothing which could seem to have justified the precaution, after he had sat down again in his big wooden easy-chair; and if the door had been wide open, and if any one had come in without warning, the visitor would have found the priest before the table, slowly lifting one long, bent shank of his silver spectacles and letting it fall upon the other, in a slow and absent-minded fashion to which no one could have attached any especial importance. People who have kept a secret very long and well, keep it when they are alone, even when it turns its bones in the narrow grave of their hearts, reminding them that it is there and would be glad to see if it could get a vampire's dead life for a night, and come out, and draw blood.

Taquisara went away and re-entered the castle, walking more slowly than was his wont. In the narrow court within, he stopped before passing through the door, and stood a long time staring at a fragment of a marble tablet with a part of a Roman inscription cut on it, which was built into the enormous masonry of the main wall and had remained white while the surrounding blocks had grown black with age. There was no more appar-

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ent reason why he should try to make out the meaning of the inscription, than why Don Teodoro should play so long with his glasses, all alone in his room. But Taquisara was not thinking of Don Teodoro. He had a secret of his own to keep from everybody, and if possible from himself.

But that was not easy. The thing which had taken hold of him was as strong as he was and seemed to be watching him, grip for grip, hold for hold, wrench for wrench. It had not beaten him yet, but he knew that to yield a hair's breadth would mean a fall, and a bad one. He had almost relaxed his strength that little, last night, when he had been alone with Veronica.

He read the letters of the inscription over twenty times, then turned sharply on his heel and went in, having probably convinced himself that to waste time over his own thoughts was the worst waste imaginable, since the more he thought of anything, the more he loved Veronica. And he had set himself to arrange the meeting between Gianluca and Don Teodoro, and each hour was precious.

His face helped him, for he did not easily betray emotion; he rarely changed colour at all, and was not a man of mobile features. But he had grown thinner since he had been in Muro, and the clearly cut curves that marked the Saracen strain in him were sharper and more defined.

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He went in and met Veronica in the large room in which they usually fenced, and which lay between what was really the drawing-room and the apartment set aside for Gianluca and Taquisara. She was standing alone beside the table, her face very white, and as she turned to Taquisara, he saw something desperate in her eyes.

"I have seen the doctor again," she said, not waiting for any greeting, and knowing that he would understand.

"And I have seen the priest," answered Taquisara.

She started, and pressed her lips tightly to suppress something. Her eyes wandered slowly and then came back to the Sicilian before she spoke.

"You have done right," she said, and then paused a second. "He is going to die to-day," she added, very low.

"That is not sure," replied Taquisara. "The doctor says that he has known cases —"

"No," interrupted Veronica. "I know it — I feel it."

She was resting one hand on the heavy table, and as she spoke she bent down, as though bowed in bodily pain. Taquisara saw the sharp lines in the smooth young forehead, and his teeth bit hard on one another as he watched her. He could not speak. With a quick-drawn breath she straightened herself suddenly and looked at him again.

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He thought he saw the very slightest moisture, not in her eyes, but on the lower lids and just below them. It was very hard to shed tears, and not like her.

"Hope!" he said gently.

During what seemed a long time they stood looking at each other with unchanging faces, and neither spoke. Some people know that dead silence which descends while fate's great hand is working in the dark, and men hold their breath and shut their eyes, listening speechless for the dull footfall of near destiny.

At last Veronica, without a word, turned from the table and went slowly towards a door. Taquisara did not move. When her hand was on the lock, she turned her head.

"Stand by me, whatever I do to-day," she said earnestly.

"Yes. I will."

He did not find any eloquent words nor oaths of protest, but she saw his face and believed him. She bent her head once, as though acknowledging his promise, and she went out quietly, closing the door behind her.

Some minutes passed before Taquisara also left the room in the other direction. He wondered why she had said those last words, for he had seen again that desperate look in her face and did not understand it. Perhaps she meant to marry

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Gianluca before he died, and at the thought Taquisara felt as though a strong man had struck him a heavy blow just on his heart, and for one instant he steadied himself by the table and swallowed hard, as though the breath were out of him. It did not last a moment. Then he, too, went out, to go to his friend.

Gianluca was gentle, quiet, almost cheerful, on that morning. He had evidently forgotten that he had opened his eyes and seen Taquisara standing by his bedside in the night, nor would he have thought anything of so common an occurrence had it come back to his recollection. He certainly did not remember having spoken of dying. But he was very weak, and his face was deadly pale, rather than transparent, as it usually seemed.

Taquisara had thought of what the doctor had said about his sufferings, and hesitated before lifting him to carry him to the next room.

"Tell me," he said, "does it hurt you very much when I take you up?"

"It hurts," answered Gianluca, with a smile. "Hurting is relative, you know. I can bear it very well. There are things that hurt more."

"What? When you try to move alone?"

"Oh no! Imaginary things. You hurt me very little — you are so careful. What should I have done without you?"

Taquisara had never touched him so tenderly

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before, though he was always as gentle as a woman with him. He lifted him, carried him from his bedroom and laid him in his accustomed chair. The pale head rested with a sigh upon the brown silk cushion.

"Thank you," he said faintly. "That was better than ever. But I am better to-day, too."

The Sicilian said nothing, but proceeded to arrange all the invalid's small belongings near him, — his books, his cigarettes, — for he sometimes smoked a little, — and the stimulant he took, and a few wild flowers which Elettra renewed every morning. Gianluca drew a breath of satisfaction when all was done. He really felt a little better, and by Taquisara's care had suffered less than usual in the moving. His father and mother had been in to see him as usual, before he was up, and before they went out for their daily walk. Veronica would not come yet, but he had the true invalid's pleasure in anticipating the coming of a well-loved woman. As often happens in such cases he seemed quite unconscious of his approaching danger.

He was not surprised when Don Teodoro came in, a little later, and the two very soon fell into conversation together. Taquisara presently went away and left them, as he often did when they began to talk of books. Half an hour had not passed since his meeting with Veronica, but as he

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again entered the room where they had met, he found her standing before the window, looking out, and twisting her handkerchief slowly with both her hands. She started when she heard him come in, and she turned her head to see who it was that had opened the door. To go on, he had to pass near her, and she kept her eyes on his face as he approached her.

"How is he?" she asked in a voice hardly recognizable as her own.

She had an agonized look, and she raised her handkerchief to her mouth quickly, and held it, almost biting it, while he answered her.

"He says that he feels better. Don Teodoro is there. He has just come. Is there anything that I can do?"

She shook her head, still holding the handkerchief to her lips, and again looked out of the window. He waited a moment longer and then passed on, leaving her alone. He saw that she was half mad with anxiety, and he neither trusted himself to speak, nor believed that speaking could be of any use. He went down to the lower bastion, where he could be alone, and for a long time he walked steadily up and down, trying hard to think of nothing, and sometimes counting his steps as he walked, in order to keep his mind from itself.

He did not idealize the woman he loved, for he was not a man of ideals, nor of much imagination.

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Such defects as she might have, he did not see, and if he had seen them he would have been indifferent to them. To such a man, loving meant everything and admitted of no comment, because there was no part of him left free to judge. He was a whole-souled man, who asked no questions of himself and no advice of others. He had never needed counsel, in his own opinion, and for the rest, what he felt was himself and not a secondary, dual being of separate passions and impressions which he could analyze and examine. He had never comprehended that strange machine of nicely-balanced doubts and certainties, forever in a state of half-morbid equilibrium between the wish, the thought, and the deed — such a man as Pietro Ghisleri was, for instance, who would refuse a beggar an alms lest the giving should be a satisfaction to his own vanity, and then, perhaps, would turn back in pity and give the poor wretch half a handful of silver. When Taquisara once knew that he loved Veronica, he never reverted to a state of doubt. He fought against it, because his friend had loved her first, and rooting himself where he stood, as it were, he would have let the passion tear him piecemeal rather than be moved by it. But he never had the smallest doubt as to what the passion was in itself and might be, in its consequences, if he should be weak for one moment. Simple struggles, when they are for life

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and death, are more terrible than any complicated conflict can possibly be.

Don Teodoro was a long time alone with Gianluca. Whatever reasons he had of his own for not wishing to comply with Taquisara's request, he overcame them and faithfully carried out the mission imposed upon him. In itself it was no very hard one. Gianluca was a religious man, as Taquisara had said that he was, and he knew that he was very ill, though he did not believe himself to be dying. With his character and in his condition, he was glad to talk seriously with such a man as Don Teodoro, and then to lay before him the account of his few shortcomings according to the practice of his belief.

The old priest came out at last, grave and bent, and, going through the rooms, he came upon Veronica standing alone where Taquisara had left her. She did not know how long she had stood there, waiting for him. He paused before her, and her eyes questioned him.

"He wishes to see you," he said simply.

"How is he?" He had not understood her unspoken question. "How is he?" she repeated, as he hesitated a moment.

"To me he seems no worse. He says that he feels better to-day. But there is something, some change — something, I cannot tell what it is, since I last saw him."

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"Stay here — please stay in the house!" said Veronica. "He may need you."

While she was speaking she had gone to the door, and she went out without looking back. A moment later, she was by Gianluca's side. She saw that what Don Teodoro had said was true. There was an undefinable change in his features since the previous day, and at the first sight of it her heart stood still an instant and the blood left her face, so that she felt very cold. She kept her back to the light, that he might not see that she was disturbed, and while she asked him how he was, her hands touched, and displaced, and replaced the little objects on the small table beside him, — the book, the glass, the flowers in the silver cup, the silver cigarette case, the things which, being quite helpless, he liked to have within his reach.

"I really feel better to-day," he said, watching her lovingly, as he answered her question. "I wish I could go out."

"You can be carried out upon the balcony in a little while," she said. "It is too cool, yet. It was a cold night, for we are getting near the end of August."

"And in Naples they are sweltering in the heat," he answered, smiling. "It is beautiful here. I can see the mountains through the open window, and the flowers tell me what the hillsides

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are like, in the sunshine. Taquisara says that your maid brings them every morning. Thank you —of course it is one of your endless kind doings."

"No," replied Veronica, frankly. "It is her way of showing her devotion, poor thing! Everybody loves you in the house—even the people who have hardly ever seen you. The women speak of you as 'that angel'!" She tried to laugh cheerfully.

"I am glad they like me, though I have done nothing to be liked by them. Please thank your maid for me. It is very kind of her."

There was a little disappointment in his voice; for he had been happy in believing that Veronica sent the flowers herself, not because he needed coin of kindness to prove her wealth of friendship, but because whatever small thing came from her hand had so much more value for him than the greatest and most that any one else could give.

She sat down beside him, and endeavoured to talk as though she were quite unconcerned. She tried not to look at his face, upon which it seemed to her that death was already fixing the last mask of life's comedy. It was the more terrible, because he was so quiet and so sure of life that morning, so convinced that he was better, so almost certain that he should get well.

It seemed an awful thing to sit there, talking against death; but she did her best not to think,

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and only to talk and talk on, and make him believe that she was cheerful, while, in a kind way, she kept him from coming back to within a phrase's length of his love for her. It was hard for him, too, to make any effort. The doctor had said so. And all the time, she fancied that his features became by degrees less mobile, and that the transparent pallor so long familiar to her was turning to another hue, grey and stony, which she had never seen.

Suddenly, while she was speaking of some indifferent thing, his eyelids closed and twitched, and his hand went out towards hers, almost spasmodically. She caught it and held it, bending far forward, and again her heart stood still till she missed its beating.

"What is it?" she asked, staring into his face, and already half wild with fear.

He could shake his head feebly, but for a moment he could not speak. With one of her hands she still held his, and with the other she pressed his brow. He smiled, as in a spasm, and then his face was a little distorted. She felt his life slipping from her, under her very touch, as though it were her fault because she would not hold it and keep it for him.

"Gianluca!" she cried, repeating his name in an agonized tone. "Gianluca! You must not die! I am here —"

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He opened his eyes, and the faint smile came back, but without a spasm this time.

"It was a little pain," he said. "I am sorry — it frightened you."

"Thank God!" she exclaimed, still bending over him. "Oh — I thought you were gone!"

"Your voice — would bring me back — Veronica," he said, with many little efforts, word by word, but with life in his face.

She moved, and held the glass to his lips. Bravely he lifted his hand, and tried to hold it himself. He drank a little of the stimulant, and then his pale head sank back, with the short, fair hair about his forehead, like a glory.

"Ah yes!" he said, speaking more easily, a moment later. "Death could never be so near but that you might stand between him and me — if you would," he added, so softly that the three words just reached her ears, as the far echo of sad music, full of beseeching tenderness.

Still she held his hand, and gazed down into his face. They had told her long ago that he was dying of love for her. In that moment she believed it true. He seemed to tell her so, to be telling it with his last breath. And each breath might be the last. Science could not save him. Physicians disagreed — the great authority himself could not say whether he was to live or die. He fainted, fell back, seemed dead already, and her voice and touch

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brought him to life, happy for an instant, hoping still and living only by the beating of hope's wings. And with all that, though she did not love him, he was to her the dearest of all living beings. Holding his hand still, she looked upward, as though to be alone with herself for one breathing space. But as she stood there, she pressed his fingers little by little more tightly, not knowing what she did, so that he wondered.

Then she bent down again, and steadily gazed into the upturned blue eyes, and once more smoothed away the fair hair from the pallid brow.

"Do you wish it very much?" she asked simply.

Half paralyzed though he was, he started, and the light that came suddenly to his face, wavered and sank and rose once more. She seemed to hear his words again, saying that she could stand between death and him, were death ever so near.

"You?" he faltered. "Wish for you? Ah God! Veronica—" his face grew dead again. "No—no—I did not understand—"

"But I mean it!" she said, in desperate, low tones, for she thought he was sinking back. "I will marry you, Gianluca! I will, dear—I will—I am in earnest!"

Slowly his eyes opened again and looked at her, wide, startled, and half blind with joy. So the leader looks who, stunned to death between the

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door-posts of the hard-won gate, wakes unhurt to life in the tide of the victory he led, and hears the strong music of triumph, and the huge shout of brave men whose bursting throats cry out his name for very glory's sake, their own and his.

Gianluca's eyes opened, and with sudden pressure he grasped the hand that had so long held his, believing because he held it and felt the flesh and blood and the warmth in his own shadowy hold.

"Veronica — love!" She would not have thought that he could press her fingers so hard, weak as he was.

The word smote her, even then, with a small icy chill, and though she smiled, there was a shadow in her face. Again he doubted.

"Veronica — for the love of God — you are not deceiving me, to save my life?" The vision of despair rose in his eyes.

"Deceive you? I?" she cried, with sudden energy. "Indeed, indeed, I mean it, as I said it."

"Yes — but — but if, to-morrow —" Again his voice was failing, and she was hand to hand with death, for him.

"No! There shall be no to-morrow for that — it shall be now!"

"Now? To-day? Now?"

He seemed to rise and sink, and sink and rise again, on the low-surging waves of his life's ebbing tide.

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"Yes — now!" she answered. "This moment. Don Teodoro is in the house — I will call him — let me go for a moment — only one moment!"

"No — no! Do not leave me!" He clung frantically to her hand. "But — yes — call him — call him! And Taquisara. He is my friend — Oh! It kills me to let you go!"

It was indeed the very supreme moment. The great burst of happiness had almost killed him, and he was like a child, not knowing what he wanted. Still he clutched her hand. A quick thought crossed her mind. She had gone to the window for a moment, to fasten it back, and had seen Taquisara walking under the vines. He might be there.

"Let me go to the window," she said, regaining her self-possession. "Taquisara may be on the bastion — I saw him there. He will call Don Teodoro, and I shall not have to leave you."

Any reasoning which kept her by his side was divinely good. Her words calmed him a little, and his hands gradually loosened themselves. But as she turned quickly, he uttered a very low cry, and tried to catch her skirt. She did not hear him. She was already speaking from the window; for the Sicilian was still there, walking up and down, as he had done for more than an hour. She called to him. He started, and looked up through the broad leaves.

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"Get Don Teodoro at once, and bring him," she cried. "He is in the house — somewhere."

Taquisara thought that Gianluca was dying, and neither paused nor answered, as he disappeared within.

Veronica came back instantly. She had not been gone thirty seconds, but already the sick man's face was grey again, though his eyes were wide and staring. His head had fallen to one side, on the brown silk cushion, in his last attempt to reach her. With both hands, she raised him a little, so that he lay straight again.

"They are coming — they are coming, dear one!" she repeated. "Live, live! Gianluca — live, for me!"

In her agony of fighting for his life, she pushed his hair back, and pressed her lips in one long kiss upon his forehead. A shiver ran through him, and the sense came back to his eyes. But though she held his hand, there was no more strength in it to grasp hers. He sighed the words she heard.

"Love — is it you? Veronica — love — life! Ah, Christ!"

And his lids closed again. The door opened, and was shut, and Veronica half turned her head to see, but she brought her face tenderly nearer to his, as though to let him know that it was for his sake she looked away. Don Teodoro and Taquisara were both in the room. Even before she spoke,

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she had changed her hold upon Gianluca's fingers, and held his right hand in hers, as those hold hands who are to be wedded.

"Bless us!" she said to the priest. "This is our marriage! Say the words — quickly!"

Taquisara's face was livid, for he had as much of instant death in him as the dying man, though he could not die. But he did not fail. He came and knelt on the other side of the couch, away from Veronica. The priest stood at the foot, in pale hesitation. Veronica's eyes commanded.

"Speak quickly!" she said. "I will marry him — I have said it! Gianluca — say it — say that you will marry me!"

Holding his right hand, with her left thrust under his pillow she lifted him so that he sat almost upright. It needed all her strength, and she was very desperate for him.

"Volo!" The one word floated on the air, breathed, not spoken, and dead silence followed.

Again Veronica turned to Don Teodoro.

"Say the words. I command you! I have the right — I am free!"

The priest's face was white now. He stretched out his arms, lifting his eyes upwards.

A worse change was in Gianluca's face before Don Teodoro had spoken the words he had to say. Taquisara saw it. Both he and Veronica bent over the motionless head. Still Veronica held the cold

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hand in hers. Taquisara knew that in another instant the priest would speak. Gently, with womanly tenderness, though his soul was on the wheel of anguish, he took Veronica's right hand and loosed it, and Gianluca's fell cold and motionless from her fingers.

"He is gone," he whispered, close to her ear, and he held her right hand firmly, in his horror at the thought that she might be wedded to a man already dead.

Veronica made a slight effort of instinct, to loose his hold and to take the hand that had fallen from hers. But it was only instinctive and hardly conscious at all. Her eyes were on Gianluca's face, and the blackness of a vast grief already darkened her soul.

There was but an instant. The tall old priest, with eyes lifted heavenwards, neither saw nor heard.

"Ego conjungo vos—" He said all the words, and then, high in air, he made the great sign of the cross. "Benedictas vos omnipotens Deus—" and he spoke all the benediction.

He closed his eyes a moment in instant prayer. When he opened them and looked down, his face turned whiter still. On each side, before him, knelt the living, Veronica and Taquisara, their hands clasped and wedded, as they had been when he had spoken the high sacramental words, and

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between them, white, motionless, the halo of his fair hair about his marble brow, lay Gianluca della Spina, like an angel dead on earth.

"Merciful Lord! What have I done!" cried the priest.

At the sound of his voice Taquisara turned quickly. But Veronica did not hear. The Sicilian saw where Don Teodoro's starting eyes were fixed, and he understood, and his own blood shrieked in his ears, for he was married to Veronica Serra. Married — half married, wholly married, married truly or falsely, by the sudden leap of violent chance — but a marriage it was, of some sort. Both he and the priest knew that, and that it must be a voice of more authority than Don Teodoro's which could say that it was no marriage. For the Church's forms of office, that are necessary, are few and very simple, but they mean much, and what is done by them is not easily undone. But Veronica neither saw nor heard.

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CHAPTER XXVI.

"I THINK — I assure you that nobody knows anything — but I think that Don Gianluca will improve rapidly after this crisis."

That was the opinion of the great doctor, when he had seen the patient on the afternoon of that memorable day. For Veronica, Taquisara, and Don Teodoro had all three been mistaken when they had thought that Gianluca was dead. As the doctor said, there had been a crisis, an inward convulsion of the nerves, a fainting which had been almost a catalepsy, and, several hours later, a return to consciousness with a greatly increased chance of life, though with extreme momentary exhaustion.

It was Taquisara who went to find the doctor, leaving Veronica on her knees, while Don Teodoro stood motionless at the foot of the couch, his hands gripping each other till his nails cut the flesh, his grotesque face invested for the moment with an almost sublime horror of what he had unwittingly done.

And then had come the physician's systematic and painful search for life, his doubts, his hopes, his suspicions, his increasing hope again, his cer-

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tainty at last that all was not over — and then the necessity for instantly carrying out his orders, the getting of all things needed for the sick man snatched out of death, and all the confusion that rises when the whole being of a great household must exert its utmost strength in one direction, to save one life.

Amidst it all, too, the helpless father and mother ran about tearful, incoherent, wringing their hands, believing no one and yet believing the impossible, praying, crying, talking, hindering everything in their supreme parents' right to be in the way and nearest to what they loved best — hysterical with joy, both of them, at the end, when the physician said that Gianluca was to live, and was not dead as they had thought him, and wildly, pathetically, insanely grateful to Veronica.

"I saw that he was dying," she told them simply, when he was out of danger. "I sent for Don Teodoro, and we were married."

They fell upon her neck, the old man and the prematurely old woman, kissing her, pressing her in their arms, crying over her, not knowing what they did.

When he saw that she was telling them, Taquisara went away from them to his own room and stayed there some time. And Don Teodoro also went home, and for the second time on that day he bolted his battered door and made sure that he was

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alone. But he did not sit at his table playing with his spectacles, as in the morning. He knelt in a corner, against one of his rough bookcases, bowed to the ground as though a mountain had come upon him unawares, and now and then he beat his forehead against the parchment bindings of his favourite folio Muratori, as certain wild beasts crouch on their knees and with a swinging of slow despair strike their heads against the bars of their cage many times in succession.

For Taquisara and Don Teodoro knew, each knowing also that the other knew, that what Veronica believed to have been done that day had not been really done, save in the intention, and that what had really been done must by Church law and right be undone before she could be truly married to Gianluca della Spina. That is to say, if the thing done had any value whatsoever before God and man.

It is easy to say that in other lands and under other practices of faith the four persons concerned in what had happened might have honestly told themselves that such a marriage was no marriage at all. An unbelieving Italian, and there are many in the cities, though few in the country, would have laughed and said that the important point was the legal union pronounced by the municipal authority, and that since there had been none here, there was nothing to undo. Yet if by any similar

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chance — more difficult to imagine, of course, but conceivable for argument's sake — the same mistake had occurred in a legal marriage by a syndic, that same unbelieving Italian would have felt in regard to it precisely what Taquisara and Don Teodoro felt, namely, that the union was well nigh indissoluble. For Italy, as a nation and a whole, while imitating other nations in many respects, has again and again refused to listen to any suggestion embodying a law of divorce. To all Italians, high, low, atheists, bigots, monarchists, republicans, — whatever they may be, — marriage is an absolutely indissoluble bond. The most that they will allow, and have always allowed, is that in such cases as Veronica's, it is in the power of the highest authority, ecclesiastic or legal, according to their persuasion, to annul a marriage altogether and declare that it never took place at all, on the ground that the requirements of the Church or of the law have not been properly fulfilled.

In society, of the two forms, which are both looked upon as necessary together, the blessing of the Church is considered by far the more indispensable, though most people acknowledge the importance and validity of the other, as well as its wisdom; and society, as an aristocratic body, as a rule refuses absolutely to receive within its doors an Italian couple who have not been married by a priest. Among all society's many traditions and

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prejudices, there is none more ancient, more deep-rooted, or more rigorous to-day than this one.

Under these circumstances it is not surprising that Taquisara, strong, loyal, and simple as he was, should honestly believe with all his heart that he had been married to Veronica; nor that Don Teodoro himself should look upon what he had unwittingly done as being something which he alone had no power to undo, if, in all conscience and truth, it had been done at all.

The worst point of all, in the opinion of those two men, was that Veronica sincerely believed herself married to Gianluca, as in her intention she really was, while Gianluca himself, having pronounced the solemn 'I will' with his last conscious breath and being told on coming to himself that the sacramental words had been spoken, had no reason at all for doubting that he was actually her husband. The position was as full of difficulties as could be imagined. To let Gianluca know the truth would have been almost certain to kill him. To speak of it to Veronica for the present seemed almost equally impracticable, though it was quite impossible to take any steps towards the annulling of the marriage without her open concurrence and help, as well as Taquisara's. Meanwhile, not only she and Gianluca, but the Duca and Duchessa, too, regarded the matter as altogether settled and accomplished. At any moment

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Veronica had it in her power to send for the syndic of Muro and cause the necessary formalities of the municipal marriage to be properly executed. She would then be legally married to Gianluca, while in the eyes of the Church she was already Taquisara's wife, by the fact of form though not by the intention of any one.

It did not occur either to Taquisara or to the priest that they could keep their secret forever and allow matters to proceed to such a conclusion. Don Teodoro was far too earnest a believer and a churchman at heart to allow what he should consider a great sin to be committed without any attempt to hinder it, and with the Sicilian the point of honour was concerned, as well as a deeply rooted adherence to social tradition and to the forms and ceremonies of religion in which he had been brought up. They were neither of them men to have so repudiated all they held the most sacred in faith and honour, even if either of them had held the secret alone without the other's knowledge.

But each knew that the other knew the truth, and on that first day, each departed to his own room lest he should be suddenly brought face to face again with the other.

It was his unwillingness to allow a thing to be done which, as a man and a gentleman, he thought both dishonourable and wrong, that prevented Taquisara from leaving Muro at once. For himself,

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his first impulse was to escape from the situation, from the horrible temptation he endured when he was with Veronica, from the barest possibility of any unfaithfulness to his friend. At that time the Italians were fighting in Massowah and as an officer of the reserve he could have volunteered for active service at a moment's notice — with a terribly good prospect of never coming back alive.

But even his death would hardly have mended matters, in his scrupulous opinion, unless Veronica should of her own accord and without any especial reason insist upon being again married in church, contrary to the Church's own rule, but on the reasonable ground that Gianluca had been unconscious during a part of the ceremony. If Taquisara were dead, such a marriage would be valid, of course; but the prospect of his death gave him no assurance that she would ever do such a thing at all; and, moreover, in spite of his passionate temperament, he was far too sensible a man to think deliberately of sacrificing his life for such reasons. Like many another man suddenly placed in a hard position as an obstacle in the path of a loved woman, he asked himself the question, whether, in honour and against religion, he should not commit suicide. But the answer was a foregone conclusion, and it was plainly his duty to stand by his friend and by Veronica, alive and able to do the best he could for them both. In immediate present circum-

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stances his presence was of the greatest importance to Gianluca, who depended on him almost entirely for help, in his sensitive dislike of being touched and moved by servants.

And the man who was thus thrust into a situation from which it seemed hard to escape at all, loved Veronica Serra with all his heart, with all his soul, with the broad, deep, simple passion of simpler times, having in him much of that old plainness of character which made men take without question the things they wanted, and hold them by main strength and stoutness of heart against all comers while they lived.

There had been a time when he had been able to speak coldly to her, and to seem to dislike her. That was past, and his devotion was even in his hands and visible, if he did with them the smallest act for her service.

She saw it, and was glad, for he pleased her more and more in the days that followed the great day, while Gianluca lay pale and happy and gaining a little strength, and she, as his wife, sat through many hours of the day by his bedside, reading to him, and telling him much about her life, but not often allowing him to speak much, lest he should lose ground and be in danger again. It seemed to her at that time that Taquisara was learning to be another friend to her, less in most ways than Gianluca had been, but having much that Gianluca

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had not — the strength, the decision, the toughness. She did not miss those things in Gianluca. She would not have had him otherwise than he was, but she saw them all, and felt their influence, and admired them in the other man.

She felt, too, that she had often treated him with unnecessary and almost unmannerly coldness, and repenting of it, she meant, in pure innocence of maiden purpose, to make it up to him now, by being more kind. Indeed, she could not understand why she had ever been so hard to him in former days, excepting when he had spoken so rudely to her at Bianca's house; and since she had seen and learned to value his loyal affection for Gianluca, she had not only forgiven him for what he had said, but had found that, on the whole, he had been right to say it.

As for her marriage with Gianluca, it seemed to her to have changed nothing, beyond the great change it had wrought in him for the better. She talked with him as before. She felt, as before, that he was her dearest and best friend. To please him, she made plans with him for their future, though sometimes the sharp fear for his life ran through her heart like a needle of ice. They could live half the year in Naples and the other six months in Muro, but sometimes, when he should be quite well, they would travel and see the world together. It was pleasant to think that they had

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the right to be always together, now, for it would have seemed terrible even to Veronica to go back to the old days of letter-writing. To her, their marriage had been the final cementing of the most beautiful friendship in the world. She was glad that she had given her life for him, since, after all, the giving of it now changed it so little. It was clear, she thought, that she was made for friendship and not for love; and since she was so made, she had done the best in marrying her best friend.

One day, when Gianluca was asleep, she had gone alone to her little rose garden up by the dungeon tower. The autumn was beginning in the mountains; there were few roses left, and the northerly breeze blew up to her out of the vast depth at her feet. Alone there, she thought of all these things and of how she was intended by her nature for this friendship of hers. Reasoning about it with herself, she took an imaginary case. Suppose, she thought, that she had begun to be Taquisara's friend, instead of Gianluca's, on that day in Bianca's garden. Her mind worked quickly. She pictured to herself the long correspondence, the intimacy of thought, the meeting and the destruction of the dividing barrier, the daily, hourly growing friendship, and then — the marriage, the touch of hands, the first kiss.

The scarlet blood leapt up like fire to her face.

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She started and looked round, half dreading lest some one might be there to see. But she was quite alone, and she wondered at herself. It must be shame, she thought, at the mere idea of marrying another man when she was Gianluca's wife. At all events, she said in her heart, she would not think of such things again. It was probably a sin, and she would remember to speak of it, at her next confession. Don Teodoro would tell her what he thought. For in lonely Muro, she had no other confessor, nor desired any. Her faults, great and small, were such as she would have acknowledged and discussed with the good man, in her own drawing-room as willingly as in church — as, indeed, she often did. But not wishing to be alone with herself any longer on that day, she came down from the tower and went to her room, where she spent an hour with Elettra in examining the state of her very much reduced wardrobe.

"Your Excellency is in rags," observed the woman. "You cannot appear in Naples as a bride with any of the things you have. In the first place, you have scarcely anything that is not black or white. But also, though some of these clothes had a cheerful youth, their old age is very sad."

Veronica laughed at Elettra's way of expressing herself, and they went over all the wardrobe together that afternoon.

As Taquisara saw how those around him seemed

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to have recovered from the terrible emotions through which they had passed, and how the life in the castle quickly subsided again to its monotonous level and ran on in its old channel, the temptation to solve all difficulties by letting matters alone presented itself to him with considerable force. Ten days had gone by, and he had not once found himself alone with Don Teodoro. When they met, they avoided each other's eyes, and each remained separately face to face with the same trouble, while each had a trouble of his own with which the other had nothing to do.

There was little or no change now from what had formerly been the daily round. Again, as before, Taquisara carried his friend daily from his own room to the large one in which Veronica and the Sicilian again fenced almost every day. Sometimes, when it was fine and warm, Gianluca was taken out upon the balcony for a couple of hours. He no longer suffered in being moved; but his lower limbs were now completely paralyzed. He hardly thought of the fact, in his constant and increasing happiness. It was only when he saw the fencing that he sometimes looked down sadly at his useless legs and thin hands, for fencing was the only exercise for which he had ever cared. He had none of that sanguine vitality which would have made such an existence intolerable to Taquisara, or even to Veronica. With her beside him,

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or if he could not have her, with books or conversation, he was not only contented, but happy. It must be remembered, too, that he was not aware that his condition was hopeless and that he might live a total cripple for many years to come. If he had known that, he might have been less gay; not knowing it, married to the woman he loved and looking forward to complete recovery, life was little short of a paradise within sight of a heaven.

Veronica never tired of taking care of him, and one might have supposed that she was satisfied with the prospect of nursing him all her life, or all his. But she herself by no means believed the doctor's predictions. She had been too sure that he was to die, and too much surprised and delighted by his recovery, to accept on mere faith of any man's verdict the assurance that he was never to walk again. There was the reaction, too, after the strong emotion and the heart-rending anxiety, the relaxation of mind and nerve, and the willingness to be happy again after so much strain and stress.

As Gianluca's general health improved, the Duca and Duchessa began to speak of an early departure for their own place near Avellino. Their eldest son's illness had placed him first with them, but they had several other children, all of whom had been under the care of a sister of the Duchessa during the latter's stay at Muro. The motherly woman

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was beginning to be anxious about them, and the old gentleman had a fair-haired little daughter of eleven summers, whom he especially loved and longed to see.

They thought that before long Gianluca might be moved. It was growing colder, day by day, in the first chill of early autumn, and they believed that a little warmth would do him good. Veronica should come and pay them a visit, and Taquisara, too.

As for the marriage, they meant that it should be an open secret for a little while longer. The servants knew of it, and would tell other servants of course, and the Duchessa had written of it to her sister, on hearing which fact Veronica had written to Bianca Corleone, telling her exactly what had happened, lest Bianca should hear of it from some one else. It was long before she had an answer to this letter, and when it came Bianca's writing was full of her own desperate sadness, though there were words of congratulation for Veronica, such as the occasion seemed to require. Bianca wrote from a remote corner of Sicily, where she was living almost alone on her husband's principal estate. There had been trouble. Corleone had suddenly taken it into his head to come home for a few weeks. Then Bianca's brother, Gianforte Campodonico, had appeared and had taken a violent dislike to Pietro Ghisleri, so that Bianca feared a quarrel

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between them. Before anything had happened, she had induced Ghisleri to go to Switzerland, and she herself had gone to Sicily, whither her brother had accompanied her. But he had been obliged to leave her soon afterwards, and she suspected that he had followed Ghisleri to the north in order to pick a quarrel with him. She was very unhappy, and there was much more about herself in her letter than about Veronica's marriage.

The old couple grew daily more anxious to leave for Avellino. They proposed that as soon as Gianluca could safely travel, the whole party should go there together. Before returning to Naples for the winter, the legal formalities of the municipal wedding could be fulfilled, and the marriage should then be formally announced. Gianluca and Veronica would come and spend the winter in the Della Spina palace, wherein, as in all Italian patriarchal establishments, there was a spacious apartment for the establishment of the eldest son whenever he should marry.

Once, when this was discussed before them, Taquisara met Don Teodoro's eyes, and the two men looked steadily at each other for several seconds. But even after that they avoided a meeting. It did not seem absolutely necessary yet, and each knew that the other had not yet found the solution of the difficulty. To every one's surprise, Gianluca opposed the plan altogether. They all seemed to

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have taken it for granted that he need not be consulted, and Veronica, in her complete self-sacrifice, would have been willing to do whatever pleased the rest. But Gianluca quietly refused to go to Avellino at all. So long as his wife would give him hospitality, he said with a proud smile, he would stay in Muro. After that, he should prefer to return directly to Naples. It was not easy to argue against an invalid's prerogative. After some fruitless attempts to move him, his father and mother temporarily desisted.

"You shall not go to Avellino," he said to Veronica, when they were alone. "It is a den of wild children and intolerable relations, and you would not have a moment's peace. You have no idea how detestable that sort of existence would be after this heavenly calm. I am very fond of my father and mother, and my brothers and sisters, and my relations, and most of them are very good people in their way. But that is no reason why you and I should be set up to be looked at, and talked at, by them all, twelve hours every day."

"I would certainly much rather stay here," answered Veronica, with a little laugh. "That is, if you can induce them to stay here, too."

"For that matter, they are quite unnecessary," said Gianluca. "There is no reason in the world why, if you like, we should not have the legal marriage here since you have a syndic and a munici

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pality. Then we could announce it, and there would be no objection to our staying here alone."

"That is true," replied Veronica, thoughtfully. "We could always do that, if we chose."

But she did not propose to do it at once, and he did not like to press her. He saw no harm, however, in speaking of the project with Taquisara. The Sicilian looked at him, said nothing, and then carefully examined a cigar before lighting it. He had long expected that such a proposal would come either from Gianluca or Veronica, and he was not surprised. But when he at last heard it made he held his breath for a moment or two and then began to smoke in silence.

"You say nothing," observed Gianluca. "Do you see any possible objection to our doing that? Society ought to be satisfied."

"I should think so," answered Taquisara. "I should think that anything would be better than Avellino and all the relations. As for going back to Naples and having a municipal wedding there, and no religious ceremony, I would not do it if I were you. The two marriages are always supposed to take place on consecutive days, or at least very near together, since both are necessary nowadays."

"I know," said Gianluca.

Taquisara made up his mind that he must take the initiative and speak with Don Teodoro. He had been willing and ready to give up all right to hope

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for the woman he loved, in order that his friend might marry her, but the idea that there should be an irregularity about the marriage, or no real marriage at all, as he believed was the case, was more than he could, or would, bear. To speak with Veronica was out of the question. He knew enough of women to understand that if she ever knew how, by an accident, she had held his hand instead of Gianluca's at the moment when she was giving her very soul to save the dying man, she might never forgive him. She might even turn and hate him. She would never believe that he himself had not known what he was doing. If it were possible, he would not incur such risk. Anything in reason and honour would be better than to be hated by her. He had seen her change of manner, of late, and he knew very well that she was beginning to like him much more than formerly.

In the morning, after Don Teodoro had said mass, Taquisara went to him and found him over his books. This time the priest recognized him at once and rose to greet him gravely, as though he had expected his visit.

"Have you made up your mind what to do?" asked the Sicilian, as he sat down.

It was as though they had been in the habit of discussing the situation together, and were about to renew a conversation which had been broken off.

"I know what I shall have to do, if matters go

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any further," answered the priest, in a dull voice, unlike his own.

"What would that be?"

"It is in my power to cause the marriage to be declared null and void."

"By appealing to your bishop, I suppose. In that event Donna Veronica would have to be told."

"There is another way."

"Then why do you not take it and act at once? Why do you hesitate?" Taquisara watched him keenly.

"Because it would mean the sacrifice of my whole existence. I am human. I hesitate, as long as there is any other hope."

"I do not understand. As for sacrificing your existence — that must be an exaggeration."

"Not at all. If it were only my own, I should not have hesitated, perhaps. I do not know. But what I should do would involve a great and direct injury to many others — to hundreds of other people."

Taquisara looked at him harder than ever, understanding him less and less.

"You seem to have a secret," he said at last, thoughtfully.

"Yes," answered the priest, resting his elbow on the old table and shading his eyes with his hand, though there was no strong light to dazzle him. "Yes — yes," he repeated. "I have a secret, a

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great secret. I cannot tell it to you — not even to you, though you are one of the most discreet men I ever met. You must forgive me, but I cannot."

"I do not wish to know it," replied Taquisara. "Especially not, if it concerns many people."

A short silence followed, during which neither moved, nor looked at the other.

"Don Teodoro," asked the Sicilian, at last, in a low voice, "please tell me your view of the case, as a priest. Am I, at the present moment, in consequence of what happened a fortnight ago, actually married to Donna Veronica, or not?"

The priest hesitated, looked down, took off his spectacles, and put them on again, before he answered the question.

"I think," he said, "that most people, if any had been present, would be of opinion that it was enough of a marriage to require a formal annullation before any other could take place. I should certainly not dare to consider the princess and Don Gianluca as married, when it was you who held her right hand, and received the benediction with her in the prescribed attitude."

"Yes," answered Taquisara; "but in your own individual opinion, as a priest, am I married to her, or not?"

"As a priest, I can have no individual opinion. I can tell you, of course, that the marriage can be annulled. In the first place, you neither of you

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had the intention of being married to each other. In all the sacraments, the intention of those to whom they are administered is the prime consideration. It would only be necessary for you and the princess to swear that you had no intention of being married, and that it was, to the best of your knowledge, entirely an accident, and all difficulties could be removed."

"Ah, yes! But then Donna Veronica would know, and Gianluca would have to know it, too. I came here to tell you that they are seriously thinking of sending for the syndic, to publish the banns of marriage at the municipality and marry them legally, after which the Duca and Duchessa will go to Avellino, and leave them here together. Whether it costs your existence or mine, Don Teodoro, this thing shall not be done."

"No," said Don Teodoro. "It shall not. You are in a terrible position yourself. I feel for you."

"I?" Taquisara bent his brows. "I, in a terrible position?"

"Do not be angry," answered the priest, gently. "I know your secret well enough, though she does not guess it yet. Do not think me indiscreet because I mention the fact. It would be far better if you could go away for the present. But I know how you are situated, and you are helping to prevent mischief. We must help each other. If it is to cost the existence of one of us, it shall be mine.

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You are young, and I am old. And that is not the only reason. My secret is not like yours. I cannot let it go down into the grave with me. I have kept it long enough, and I should have kept it longer, if this had not happened. I shall probably go to Naples to-morrow. You must prevent them from publishing the banns until I come back, or until you hear from me. I may never come back. It is possible."

"What do you mean?" asked Taquisara, for he saw a strange look in the old man's clear eyes.

"I shall not end my life here," he said quietly.

"You? End your life? You, commit suicide? Are you mad, Don Teodoro?"

"Oh no! I may live many years yet. I hope that I may, for I have much to repent of. But I shall not live here."

"I hope you will," said Taquisara. "But if you know my secret — keep it."

"As I have kept mine till now," answered the old man.

So they parted, and Taquisara went back to the castle, leaving the lonely priest among his books.

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CHAPTER XXVII.

Veronica did not wish the people of Muro to believe that she was marrying a cripple. That was the reason why she did not at once agree to Gianluca's proposal and send for the syndic to perform the legal ceremony. She had persuaded herself that by quick degrees of improvement, he would recover the power to stand upright, at least to the extent to which he had still retained his strength when he had first arrived. Since he had lived through the crisis, she grew sanguine for him and hoped much.

Her feeling was natural enough in the matter, though it was made up of several undefined instincts about which she troubled herself very little — pride of race, pride of personal wholeness and soundness, pride of womanhood in the manhood of a husband. Veronica named none of these in her thoughts, but they were all in her heart. Few women would not have felt the same in her place.

She was sure that he was to get better, if not quite well, and she wished that he might be well enough to stand beside her on his feet when they should be formally married. If he continued to

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improve as rapidly as during the past fortnight, she believed that the day could not be far off. When he could stand, in another month, perhaps, the syndic should come. It was even possible that by that time he might be able to walk a little with her in the village.

Her people were a sort of family to her. That was a remnant of feudalism in her character, perhaps, which had suddenly developed during the months she had spent in Muro. But that, too, was natural, as it was natural that they should love her and almost worship the ground she trod. For the poorer classes of Italians are sometimes very forgetful of benefits, but are rarely ungrateful. She had done in a few months, for their real advantage, so that they felt it, enough to make up for the oppression of generations of Serra, and almost enough to atone for the extortions of Gregorio Macomer. She was the last of her name, and her husband, if he lived, was to be the father of a new stock, which would be called Serra della Spina, and whose men would hold the lands and take the rents and do good, or not, according to their hearts, each in his generation. It seemed to her that the people had a right to see Gianluca standing on his feet beside her, since her marriage was to mean so much to them.

Don Teodoro came to her, soon after Taquisara had left him, to tell her that he must go to Naples

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without delay. She looked at him in astonishment at the proposal, and as she looked, she saw that his face was changed. Oddly enough, he held himself much more erect than usual; but his features were drawn down as though by much suffering, and his eyes, usually so clear and steady, wandered nervously about the room.

"You are not well," said Veronica. "Why must you go now?"

"It is because I must go now that I am not well," answered the priest, shaking his head. "I am very sorry to be obliged to leave you at this time. I only hope that, if you are thinking of fulfilling the legal formalities of your marriage, you will give me notice of the fact, so that I may come back, if I can. You know that all that concerns you concerns my life."

Veronica looked at him, and wondered why he was so much disturbed. But his words gave her an opportunity of speaking to him about her own decision. She did not wish him to think her capricious, much less to imagine that she looked upon the marriage as a mere piece of sentiment, which was not to change her life at all, except to bind her as a nurse to the bedside of a hopeless invalid. That idea itself was beginning to be repugnant to her, and the hope that Gianluca might recover was becoming a necessary part of her happiness, though she scarcely knew it.

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"My dear Don Teodoro," she said, "so far as that is concerned, you may be quite sure that I will let you know in time. I have not the slightest intention of fulfilling any legal formalities until my husband is well enough to stand on his feet with me before the syndic; and I am afraid that he will not be well enough for that in less than a month, at the earliest."

The wandering eyes suddenly fixed themselves on her face, the strange great features relaxed, and the wide, thin lips smiled at her. His happiness was strangely founded, but it was genuine, though not altogether noble. Her words were a reprieve; and he could keep his secret longer, almost, perhaps, until he died, and when he should be dying, it would be easier to tell. But that was far from being all. He loved her, as the source of great charity and kindness from which the people were drawing life, with all his own passionate charity; and he loved her for herself, for her gentleness and her hardness, because she ruled him, and because she touched his heart. All other thoughts away, he could not bear to think of her as bound for life to be the actual wife of a helpless cripple.

And something of her own heart he half guessed and half knew. For in her innocence she had confessed to him how she had thought of Taquisara, when she had been alone that day, and how the blood had flowed in her face, and burned her so

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that she was almost sure that such thoughts must be wrong. It was because she had told him these things that he had watched Taquisara ever since, and he had seen that the man loved her silently.

But he knew also, as well as any one could know it, that Gianluca would never stand upon his feet again. And, moreover, he knew that though it would seem wrong to Veronica to love Taquisara, and would be wrong, if she had intention, as it were, yet there could be no real sin in it, for she was not Gianluca's wife. Had she been truly married, Don Teodoro, gentle and old, would have found strength to force Taquisara to go away — had anything more than the force of honour been needed in such a case.

"I am very glad, my dear Princess," he said, and his voice trembled in the reaction after his own anxiety. "You do not wish me to go to Naples, now?" he said with an interrogation, after a brief pause. "You would rather that I should wait until Christmas?"

"Of course — if you can," answered Veronica, somewhat surprised at his change of tone. "But if you really must go, if you are so very anxious to go at once, I must not hinder you."

"I will see," said Don Teodoro. "I will think of it. Perhaps it can be arranged — indeed, I think it can."

He was old, she thought, and he had never been

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decided in character, except about doing good to poor people, and studying Church history. So she did not press him with questions, but let him do as he would; and he did not go to Naples then, but he went and found Taquisara within the hour, and told him what Veronica had said about her marriage.

The Sicilian heard him in silence, as they stood together on the lower bastion where they had met, but Don Teodoro saw the high-cut nostrils quiver, while the even lips set themselves to betray nothing.

"If matters go no further than they have gone," he said at last, as the priest waited, "we need do nothing."

So they did nothing, and Don Teodoro did not go to Naples.

The daily life ran on in its channel. But Gianluca did not continue to improve so fast. Then it seemed as though improvement had reached its limit, and still he was helpless to stand, being completely and hopelessly paralyzed in his lower limbs. At first, neither the old couple nor Veronica realized that he was no longer getting better, though he was no worse. He himself did not believe it; but Taquisara saw and understood. Gianluca refused to be moved, insisting that he was gaining strength, and that some day the sensation would come suddenly to his feet, and he should stand upright. Otherwise, he was now almost as well as when he had come to Muro. They sent for a wheel-chair

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from Naples, and he wheeled himself through the endless rooms, and to luncheon, and to dinner, Veronica walking by his side. It gave his arms exercise, and he became very expert at it, laughing cheerfully as he made the wheels go round, and he went so fast that Veronica sometimes had to run a few steps to keep up with him.

Then, one day, Taquisara carried him out to the gate, and set him in the carriage, and Veronica took him for a short drive. The poor people were, most of them, at their work, but the very old men and the boys and girls turned out, and flocked after the victoria as it moved slowly through the narrow street. Some of them called out words of simple blessing on the couple, but others hushed them and said that the princess was not really married yet. Gianluca smiled as he looked into Veronica's face, and she smiled, too, but less happily.

The weather changed. There had been a short touch of cold in the air at the end of August, and breezes from the north that poured down from the heights behind the castle, into the tremendous abyss below, and shot up again to the walls and the windows, even as high as the dungeon tower. Then, at the new moon, the weather had changed, the sky grew warm again, the little clouds hung high and motionless above the peaks, melting from day to day to a serene, deep calm, in which all the earth seemed to be ripening in a great stillness while heaven held

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its breath, and the mountains slept. In the rich valley the grapes grew full and dark, and the last figs cracked with full sweetness in the sun, the pears grew golden, and the apples red, and all the green silver of the olive groves was dotted through and through its shade, with myriad millions of dull green points, where the oil-fruit hung by little stems beneath the leaves.

An autumn began, such as no one in Muro remembered — an autumn of golden days and dewy moonlight nights, soft, breathless, sweet, and tender. It was a year of plenty and of much good wine, which is rare in the south, for when the wine is much it is very seldom good. But this year all prospered, and the people said that the Blessed Mother of God loved the young princess and would bless her, and hers also, and give her husband back his strength, even by a miracle if need should be.

Gianluca clung to the place where he was happy, and would not be taken away. His mother humoured him, and the old Duca, yearning for his little fair-haired daughter, went alone at last to Avellino.

Then came long conversations at night between the Duchessa and Veronica. The Duchessa loved her son very dearly, but since he was so much better, she was tired of Muro. She wished to see her other children. It was ridiculous to expect that she and her husband should relieve each other

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as sentries of propriety in Veronica's castle, the one not daring to go till the other came back. Why should Veronica not send for the syndic and have the formalities fulfilled? Once legally, as well as christianly, man and wife, the two could stay in Muro as long as they pleased.

But Veronica would not. Gianluca was improving, and before long he would walk. She had set her heart upon it, that he should be strong again. She would not have her people think that he was a cripple. The people were peasants, the Duchessa answered, peasants like any others. Why should the Princess of Acireale care what such creatures thought? But Veronica's eyes gleamed, and she said that they were her own people and a part of her life, and she told the Duchessa all that was in her mind, very frankly, and so innocently, yet with such unbending determination to have her way, that the Duchessa did not know what to do. Thereupon, after the manner of futile people, she repeated herself, and the struggle began again.

It was a tragedy that had begun. Veronica had escaped with her life from Matilde Macomer to find out in the consequence of her own free deeds what tragedy really meant, and how bitter the fruit of good could be.

Nor in the slightest degree had her affection for Gianluca diminished, nor did it change in itself, as days followed days to full weeks, and week choked

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week, cramming whole months back into time's sack, for time to bear away and cast into the abyss of the useless and irrevocable past.

Still he was her friend, still she would give her life to save him, and would have given it again if it had been to give. Still she could talk with him, and listen to him, and answer smile and word and gesture. She could sit beside him through quiet hours, and drive with him in the vast, still sunshine of that golden autumn, calling him by gentler names than friend and touching his hand softly in the long silence. All this she could do, and if there were ever any effort in it, that was surely not an effort to be kind, but one of those little doubting, uncertain, spontaneous efforts which we make whenever we unconsciously begin to feel that it will not be enough to do right, but that we must also seem to do right in other eyes, lest our right be thought half hearted.

The days were monotonous, but it was not their monotony which she felt, so much as that irrevocable quality of them all which made a grey background in her soul, against which something was moving, undefined, strong as the unseen wind, yet mistily visible sometimes, having more life than shape — a terrible thing which drew her to it against her will, and yet a thing which had in it much besides terror.

She turned from it when she knew that it was

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there, and fixed her sight upon Gianluca's face. Sometimes she found comfort in that, and she did all that was required of her, and more also, and was glad to do it.

But the wrong done to nature was deeper and more real than all the good she could do to hide it, and it cried out against her continually by the voice of the woman's instinct. It was not Gianluca who became intolerable to her, but she herself, and it was to escape from herself that she clung to him closely, as well as out of affection for him; for when she was by herself she was no longer alone. That other unshaped something kept her company.

She was bound hand and foot, soul, body, and intelligence, for life. She, the very strong, was tied to the helpless; she, the energetic, was bound to apathy; she, the active, was nailed to the passive; she, the free, the erect, was bowed under a burden which she must carry to her life's end, never to be free again.

She could bear the burden, and she said none of these things to herself. But the wrong was upon nature, and the mother of all turned against the one child that would be unlike all the rest.

The man who was a man, soul and body, heart, hand, and spirit, stood beside the other, who was a shadow, and beside her, who was a woman — and the tragedy began in the prologue of contrast.

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Strength to weakness, motion to immobility, the grace and carriage of manly youth to the sad restfulness of helpless, hopeless limbs that never again could feel and bear weight; that was the contrast from which there was no escaping. On the steps of love's temple, at the very threshold, the one lay half dead, never to rise again; and beside him stood the other, in the pride and glory of the morning of life.

It would have been hard, even if the contrast had been less strong to the eye, and the distance of the two souls greater one from the other — even if Taquisara had not been what he was. But as the one, in his being, was alive from head to heel, so the other was dead save in the thoughts in which he still had a shadowy life. And for the rest — flesh, blood, and life apart — they were equals. Was Gianluca true? Taquisara was as honest and loyal as the brave daylight. Was the one brave? So was the other, in thought and deed. Was Gianluca enduring? So was Taquisara, and he had the more to endure, the more to fight, the more to keep down in him.

She knew that he loved her. How it was that she knew it she could not tell, but sometimes the music of the truth rang in her ears till the flame shot up in her face and she shut her eyes to hide her soul — a loud, triumphant music, stately and grand as might herald the marching of archangels

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—till her inward cry of terror pierced it, and all was as still as the grave. Then, for a space, the vision of sin stood dark in the way, and she turned and fled from it back to Gianluca's side, back to the care of him, back to his helpless love for her, back to his pathetic, stricken restfulness, back to the maiden dreams of a life-long friendship, unbroken as the calm of the summer ocean, perfect as the cloudless sky of those golden autumn days.

For a time, the dark wraith of sin faded, and there was no music in the air, and her cheek was cool, while she looked all the world in the face with the fearless eyes of a child-empress. Again the monotonous, good day rolled in the same grooves, noiselessly, and surely, as all the days to come were to roll along, to the end of ends. She worked for her people, talked with Don Teodoro, talked, smiled, laughed with Gianluca, and bore the old Duchessa's ramblings with patience and kindness.

But all of a sudden, for a nothing, at the sight of a fencing foil, at the smell of Gianluca's cigarette, at the sound of a footfall she knew, there came the mad wish to be alone; and she resisted it, for it did not seem good to her, and even as she struggled the blood rose in her throat and was in her cheeks in a moment, so that if just then by chance Taquisara came upon her suddenly, the room swam and for an instant her brain reeled as she turned her face from him in mortal shame.

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She knew so well that he loved her, and that he was suffering, too. It was love's hands that had chiselled the bronze of his face to leaner lines, and that threw a new darkness into his dark eyes. It was for her that there was that other note in his voice that had never been there before. It was for love of her that once or twice, when she took his hand in greeting, it was icy cold — not like Gianluca's, half dead, and dull, and chilly, and very thin — but cold from the heart, as it were, and more wildly living than if it had burned like fire; trembling, and not in weakness, with something that caught her own fingers and ran like lightning to the very core and quick of her soul, hurting it overmuch with its bolt of joy and fear. It was for her that, at the first, he had been cold and silent, because he was afraid of himself, and of love, and of the least, faintest breath that might tarnish the bright shield of his spotless loyalty to Gianluca.

All the little changes in his speech and manner were clear to her now, and each had its meaning, and all meant the same. His words, spoken from time to time, came back to her, and she understood them, and saw how, for his friend's sake, he had held his peace for himself, and had ever urged her to marry Gianluca, in spite of everything.

If he had not loved her, or if she had thought that he did not, she would have had the pride to tear her heart clean from love's terrible hands,

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whole or broken, as might be, and to toss it, with the dead dull weeks into old time's sack of irrevocably lost and useless things, and so to live her life out, loveless, in the still haven of Gianluca's friendship. But, having his love, she had not such pride; and the loyalty she truly had was matched alone against all human nature since the world began.

Do what she would, she yielded sometimes to that great wish to go suddenly to her own room and be alone. Then, standing at her window when the mist whitened in the valley under the broad moon, she listened, and instantly the air was full of music again as love lifted up its voice, and sweetly chanted the melody of life. With parted lips she listened, till the moonlight filled her eyes, and her heart fluttered softly, and her throat was warm.

And sometimes, too, while she was there, the man who loved her so silently and so well was by his friend's side, tending as his own the life that stood between him and the hope of happiness; loving both him and her, but honour best. But sometimes he, too, was alone in his own room, and even at his window, facing the same broad moon, the same white mist in the sleeping valley, the same dark, crested hills, but not hearing the music that the woman heard. He could be calm for a while as he looked out; but presently, without warning, he swallowed hard, and again, as on the fatal day, he held her little hand in his, under the priest's

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great sign of the cross, and his own blood shrieked in his ears. In cruel anger against himself, he turned from the window then and paced the room with short, braced steps, till at last he threw himself into a deep chair and sullenly took the first book at hand, to read himself back to the monotony of all he had to bear.

And so those two fearless ones went through the days and weeks in twofold terror of themselves and each of the other, and the slow, wordless tragedy was acted before eyes that saw but did not understand. Still Gianluca refused to go away, and still Veronica refused to send for the syndic. She would not yield to the Duchessa, who found herself opposed both by her son and her son's wife.

No one knew how much Veronica herself still hoped, when the bright autumn days were broken at last by the first winter storm that rose out of the dark south in monstrous wrath against such perpetual calm. She herself did not know whether she still hoped for any improvement, or whether, in her inmost thoughts, she had given up hope and had accepted the certainty that Gianluca was never to be better than he was now. There is something of habit in all hope that has been with us long, and the habits we notice the least are sometimes the hardest of all to break.

When Veronica said that Gianluca would yet stand up and walk, no one contradicted her, except

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the doctors, and she had no faith in them. They came and went. The great professor came three times from Naples and saw the patient, ate his dinner, slept soundly, and went away assuring Veronica that it was useless to send for him unless some great change took place. To please her, he recommended a little electricity, baths, light treatment such as could give little trouble, and he carefully instructed the young doctor of Muro in all he was to do. When he had finished, and the young man had promised to do everything regularly, they looked at each other, smiled sadly, but professionally, and parted with mutual good will and understanding, both knowing that the case was now perfectly hopeless. Their coming and going made little intervals in the tragic play of life, but never broke its continuity.

The old Duca appeared again, and slipped quietly into his place, as before. But at the end of a week there was an unexpected flaring-up of energy, as it were, in his docile and affectionate being. When he and his wife and Veronica were with Gianluca, he suddenly declared that the situation must end, and that they must all go down to Naples. Veronica should send for the syndic, and have the legal marriage at once, and then they would all go down together. It was quite clear in his mind, as simple as daylight, as easy of performance as breathing, as satisfactory as satisfaction

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itself. The Duchessa was with him, and supported all he said with approving nods and futile gestures and incoherent phrases thrown in, as one throws straws upon a stream to see the current carry them away.

Gianluca said nothing, and Veronica stood alone against them all, for she knew that he was on his father's side. She guessed, perhaps, that Gianluca had made up his mind never to leave her roof except as her lawful husband, clinging to her, as he had tried to cling to her skirt on that most eventful day when she had gone to the window for a moment; and she understood why, having spoken once, he would not speak again. He was too proud to repeat such a request, but his love was far too obstinate to be satisfied with less than its fulfilment. But his own hope for his recovery was more alive than hers.

Instinctively, as she opposed them all, Veronica looked round for Taquisara. It was not often that she needed help, and she knew that he could have helped her, had he been there. But she had to speak for herself. She said what she could; but in that self-examination which self-defence forces upon those who have never dissected their own hearts, a new and fearful truth sprang up, clear of all others, bright, keen, and terrible.

It was no longer for her people's sake that she was waiting in the hope of Gianluca's recovery.

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It was no longer for her own, nor for his. It was out of her deadly love for Taquisara that all her nature rose against that final bond of the law, and the world, and society. So long as that was not yet welded and made fast upon her, there was the fleeting shadow of a desperate hope that she might still be free.

It rose and smote her between the eyes, and clutched at her heart; and when she knew its face, she stopped in the midst of her speech, and turned white, even to her lips and her throat.

"I do not know. I will think about it," she said faintly.

As her power to oppose gave way, the Duca's astonishment at his victory swelled his weakness to violence; and he raved of duties and obligations, of paternal authority, of the obedience of children and children-in-law, in all the boundless, self-assured incoherence of feebleness suddenly let loose against smitten strength.

Veronica seemed to hear nothing. She had resumed her seat beside Gianluca, and was stroking his white hand, — less thin than it had been, but somehow even more lifeless, — and she looked down at it very thoughtfully, while he watched her face. He was happier than he had been for a long time, for he knew that she was going to make a concession, and that he had not asked for it.

There was silence, and Veronica raised her head.

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The old Duca's face was red with the exertion of much speaking. He was a good man and meant well, but in that moment Veronica hated him as she had never hated any one, not even Matilde Macomer. And yet she knew that his intention was all for the best, and that it was natural that he should press his point and exult when she gave up the fight. She opened her lips to speak.

At that moment the door turned on its hinges opposite her eyes, and Taquisara stood before her. He came in quietly and not knowing that anything extraordinary was occurring. But his eyes met hers for one moment, and instantly her cheek reddened in the evening light.

"I will give you a promise," she said slowly. "This is the first week in December. If Gianluca is not much better by the first of January, I will do as you ask. The civil marriage shall take place here, and if he wishes to go down to Naples, we will all go together."

The Duca began to speak again, sure that he could press her further. But she interrupted him. Taquisara had gone to the window and was turning his back on them all.

"No," said Veronica. "That is what I will do, and I will do it — I have promised — that, and nothing else."

She had risen, and as she pronounced the last words, she left Gianluca's side and, with her eyes

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fixed before her, went straight to the door, pale and erect. She felt that she had given her life a second time. Taquisara heard her footsteps, left the window, and opened the door for her to pass, standing aside while she went by. He saw her head move a little, as though she would turn and look at him, and he saw how resolutely she resisted and looked before her. He understood that she would not trust herself to see his eyes again, and he quietly closed the door behind her. She knew what he must have felt when she had spoken, and he felt a lofty pride that she should trust him to bear the knife without warning, sure that he would utter no cry.

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CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE tenth of December was at hand, on which day Don Teodoro had been in the habit of going to Naples to pay his annual visit to his friend Don Matteo. When Taquisara told him of what had taken place, the priest knew that he need not disturb Veronica for permission to leave Muro, merely for the sake of gaining a day or two. One day was all he needed, and there would be three weeks from the tenth of December to the first of January. He made his preparations for the little journey with much care, and went away with more luggage than usual. He also set all his manuscripts and books in order. When he was going away he gave the key of his little house to Taquisara.

"I do not expect to come back," he said. "But you will hear from me. It will be kind of you to have my books and manuscripts sent to an address which I will give you in my letter. I do not think that we shall meet again. Good-bye. If I were not what I am, I would bless you. Good-bye."

Taquisara held his hand for a moment.

"We shall all bless you," he answered, "if you can end this trouble."

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"I can," said the priest. "And your blessing is worth having."

He went away quickly, as though not trusting himself to speak any more. He had taken leave of Veronica and the rest as hastily as he could without giving offence to any one. It was not until he looked back at the poor people who waved their hands at him as he went out of the village that the hot tears streamed down his cheeks.

He was twenty-four hours in reaching Naples, as usual, and his friend greeted him with open arms as he always did. He thought that Don Teodoro looked ill and tired, and as it was a fine day they walked the short distance from Don Matteo's house to the café where the priest had sat with Bosio, and they each drank a cup of chocolate.

Don Matteo observed that the tenth of December had been a fine day in the preceding year, too, and Don Teodoro tried to remember in what year it had last rained on that date. They ate little puffed bits of pastry with their chocolate, and they sat a long time over it, while Don Matteo told Don Teodoro of an interesting document of the fourteenth century which he had discovered in a private library. Don Teodoro spoke rarely, but not at random, for the thinking habit of the scholarly mind does not easily break down, even under a great strain.

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Then they went back to Don Matteo's house, and sat down together in the study. Don Matteo wondered why his friend did not unpack and arrange his belongings, especially as he had brought more luggage than usual with him, but he saw that he was tired, and said nothing. Don Teodoro took off his spectacles, and rubbed them bright with the corner of his mantle. He looked at them and took a long time over polishing them, for he was thinking of all the things he had seen through the old silver-rimmed glasses, some of which he should never see again.

"My friend," he said at last, "I wish to tell you a secret."

Don Matteo turned slowly in his seat, uncrossed his knees, and looked at him.

"You may trust me," he answered.

"I know that," said Don Teodoro. "But there are reasons, as you will see, why you cannot receive this as an ordinary secret. I wish to tell it to you as a confession. You will then have to consult the archbishop, before giving me absolution — and advice."

"Is it as serious as that?" asked Don Matteo, very much surprised, for only the very gravest matters, and generally the most terrible crimes, are referred to the bishop by a confessor.

"It is a grave matter," answered Don Teodoro. "Have the kindness to get your stole, and I will

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make my confession here. But we will lock the outer door of the outer room, if you please."

He was shivering, and his face was white as he rose to go and slip the bolt. Re-entering the room, he locked the inner door also behind him. Don Matteo had produced from a drawer an old violet stole with tarnished silver embroidery. It was carefully wrapped up in thin, clean, white paper. A priest always wears the stole in administering any of the seven sacraments. He passed it over his head, and the broad bands fell over his breast, and he held the ends, upon which were embroidered small Greek crosses, in one of his hands. Grave and silent, he sat down beside the table, resting his elbow upon it and shading his eyes with his other hand.

Don Teodoro knelt down beside him at the table, and each said his part of the preliminary form in a low voice. When Don Teodoro had said the first half of the 'Confiteor,' he was silent for some time, and Don Matteo was aware that his tall, thin frame was trembling, for the table shook under his elbow. Then he began to speak, as follows: —

"I must tell the story of my life. My father was an officer in the army of King Ferdinand, under the former government, and I was his only child. He had a little fortune, and his pay was relatively large for those days, so that I was brought up as a gentleman's son. My father, who

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had been so fortunate as to make many advantageous friendships in the course of his career, wished me to enter the military academy and the army. By his interest I should have had rapid advancement. But this was not my inclination. Ever since I can remember anything, I know that I ardently wished to be a priest. As a little boy, I used to make a small altar in a dark room behind my own, and I used to adorn it and dress it for the feast days, and light tapers on it, and save my pocket money to buy tiny silver ornaments for it. Before I could read I knew the Rosary and the short Litanies, and I used to say them very devoutly before my little altar, with genuflexions and other gestures such as I saw the priests make in church. My father smiled sometimes, but he did not interfere. He was a devout man, though he was a soldier. I had some facility for learning, also, and was fond of all books. My mother died when I was four years old.

"I need not tell how the devout passion increased in me as I grew older. I passed through all the stages of such development very quickly. My father believed that I had a true vocation for the Church, and yielding to my entreaties and to the advice of his friends, who told him that he could never make a soldier of such a boy, he allowed me to enter a seminary. I was very happy, and my love of books and my earnest desire to be a priest

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continued to increase. I was made a deacon and received the tonsure. Then I fell ill. It was the will of Heaven, for I never was ill before that, nor have been since. It was a long illness, a dangerous fever. Just before that time, while I was in the seminary, my father had married a second time, a young and very beautiful woman, scarcely two years older than I. They both took care of me, and she was very kind and liked me from the first.

"I loved her. That was perhaps an illness also, for I never suffered in that way again. It was very terrible, for I knew what a great sin it was to love my father's wife. I never told her that I loved her, and she was always the same, kind and good. My heart was red-hot iron in my breast, day and night, and it was very long before I was really well again. After that, I confessed my sin many times, but I could not feel repentance for it. My father wondered, and so did she, why I would not go back to the seminary for the few months that remained to complete my studies. It would have been better if I had gone back. But I loved her, and I could not. I could not confess the sin in my heart to the confessor of the seminary, for whom I had great esteem and who had known me so long. I was ashamed, and waited, thinking that it would pass. But I wished to escape.

"I joined myself as a lay brother to a Franciscan

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mission that was going to Africa. My father made many objections to this, but I overcame them. I think he guessed that I loved his wife, and though he loved me, too, he was glad that I should go away. As for me, I trusted that in the labours of a distant mission I should forget my love, feel honest repentance, receive absolution, and be ordained a true priest by a missionary bishop.

"We were seven who started together upon that mission. After two years I alone was left alive. One after the other they died of the fever of that country. We had written for help, but I knew afterwards that our letters had not reached the sea. That was why no one came to bring help. We had converted people amongst those savages and had built a chapel. Even those who were not converted were friendly, for we had taught them many things. My companions all died, one by one, and I buried the last. But I myself was never ill of the fever. Yet the people there clung around me. I committed a great sin. They had no priest, and they did not understand that I was not one, for I dressed like the others. If there were no more services in the little chapel, they would think that Christianity was dead, and they would fall back to their former condition. I took the sin upon myself, and I said mass for them, knowing that it was no mass, and praying that God would forgive me, and that it might not be a sacrilege. I did

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not fall ill. I lived amongst them, and received their confessions and administered all the sacraments when they were required, for the space of a year and a half, during which I sent many appeals for help. But in my letters I did not explain what I was doing, for I intended to go to the bishop if I ever got home alive, and confess to him.

"At last help came, priests and lay brothers. It pleased Heaven that they should come at last at the very moment when I was saying mass for the people. Of course there was no bishop amongst them, and none of them knew that I was not a priest. I should have confessed the truth to the eldest of them, but I had no courage, for I did not do it at once, but put it off, and as every priest said mass every day, I said mine, too, on the first morning after the others had come. I wished to go away at once. But I alone knew all the people, and could preach a little in their language, and I was much loved by them, for I had been alone with them during eighteen months. So my new brethren would not let me go, and after what I had done so far, I was ashamed to tell the truth about myself. They looked up to me as a superior, because I had been so long in the mission and had lived through what had killed so many. They thought me very humble and praised my humility. But it was not humility — it was shame.

"During two years more I remained with them,

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and two of them died, but the rest lived, for I had learned how men should live in that country in order to escape the fevers, and I taught them. The mission grew, and many people were converted. Then they began to speak of sending home two of their number to Rome, to give an account of the work, and to get more help, if possible, in order that the conversion might be carried further into the country; and they decided to do so. It was my right to be one of the two, and I took it. My companion was a young priest less strong than the rest, and we left the mission and after a long journey we got home safely. I meant to go to the first bishop I met, and make my confession.

"But when we came to Rome and we were giving an account of what had been done, the young priest thrust me forward to speak, as was natural, and I seemed to be a personage of importance, because I had lived through so many perils and had outlived so many. We two were invited to dinner by cardinals, and were admitted to a private audience of the Pope. Everybody seemed to know what I had done, and even the liberal newspapers praised my courage and devotion.

"I had no courage, for being full of vanity, I never confessed my sin. But I would not go back to the mission, and when I could leave Rome, I left the young priests there and went to Naples

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to see my father. He had read what had been written about me, and was proud of me, and he received me gladly, for he loved me and was a devout man. Six years had passed since I had seen his wife, and though I trembled when I was just about to see her, yet when she entered the room I knew that I did not love her any more, and I was very much pleased to find that this sin, at least, had left me.

"I lived with them several years, devoting myself to study, and I used to say my mass in a church close by. For I was a priest by nature and heart, and I had grown so used to my sin of sacrilege, that I shut my eyes, and told myself that it was the wish of Heaven. But the truth is, I was a coward. It was then that you first knew me and you know how my father died and my stepmother married again, and how I undertook to be the tutor of poor Bosio Macomer. But with years, the city grew distasteful to me, and I wished to be alone, for Bosio was grown up, and I had no heart for teaching any one else. I was also very poor, having spent what my father left me, both on books, and in other ways of which I need not speak because there was nothing wrong in what I did with the money.

"And then, Count Macomer — the one who is now insane — offered to make me curate of Muro and chaplain of the castle of the Serra, all of which

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you know. And I, accustomed to my wickedness, and feeling myself a priest, though I was not one, accepted it for the peace of it.

"It is a very terrible thing. For all the sacraments I have administered in these many years have been of no value; but the worst, for its consequences, is that none of the many hundreds I have married, are truly married, and that if the truth were known to them, the confusion would be beyond my power to imagine. But Christians they are, for a layman may baptize, even though he be not in a state of grace.

"And for the other sacraments, the sin is all mine, as you see, and God will be good to them all, according to the intention and belief they had. And now a worse thing has happened, though it was not my fault, excepting that the original fault is all mine. For Don Gianluca della Spina was lying at the point of death, and there were with him the princess and Don Sigismondo Taquisara, the Baron of Guardia, his friend. The princess desired to be married to Don Gianluca, before he died, and sent for me in great haste and commanded me to marry them. As I raised my eyes to speak, for it was impossible to resist her will, the Taquisara thought that Don Gianluca was dead and took the princess's hand from the dead man's, as he thought, and as I suppose — and I gave them the benediction. But when I looked down, it was

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the Baron of Guardia who appeared to have been married to the princess, for their right hands were clasped; and I cannot tell whether, if I were a true priest, they would have been married or not.

"But the princess and Don Gianluca believe that I made them husband and wife, though the Taquisara knows that something was wrong, since he held her hand. For Don Gianluca has recovered, and they are now about to have a civil marriage and announce it to their friends.

"It was the will of God that my own sin should follow me to the end, and that it should be the means of freeing these three persons from their terrible position. For the Baron of Guardia believes that he is married to the princess, and she believes that she is Don Gianluca's wife. But as yet no further harm is done, and the Taquisara is the bravest gentleman and the truest man to his friend that ever drew breath. Therefore I have made this confession. And I will abide all the consequences. The bishop before whom you will lay the case will know what is to be done. It will be in his power, I presume, to acquaint the princess with the fact that she is not married at all, and must be married by a true priest; and to do so, without injuring the poor people of Muro who have been the victims of my sin for many years.

"That is my confession. And now, if I have not made all clear to you, I beg you to ask me such

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questions as you think fit, for it is not in your power to give me absolution."

Don Teodoro was exhausted. His face sank upon his folded hands on the edge of the table, and his shoulders trembled.

"My poor friend! My poor friend!" repeated Don Matteo, in a low and wondering tone. "No — it is quite clear," he added. "There is nothing which I have not understood. But I can say nothing, my poor friend! Pray — pray for forgiveness. God will forgive you, for you have done evil only to yourself, and never anything but good to others."

Don Teodoro in a hardly audible voice repeated the second half of the 'Confiteor' and remained on his knees a little while longer. Don Matteo covered his eyes with his hands, and during several minutes there was silence. Then the two old men rose and looked at each other for a moment.

"Courage!" said Don Matteo, and he gently patted his friend's shoulder.

He took off his stole, folded it carefully, and wrapped it in its clean white paper again, before putting it away. But he did that by force of habit. Confessors hear strange things sometimes and are not easily disconcerted, but Don Teodoro's was the strangest tale that had ever come to Don Matteo's ears. Again he came and patted Don Teodoro's shoulder in a way of kindly encouragement.

Then he took his three-cornered hat and went

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out without a word. In such a case there was no time to be lost.

Cardinal Campodonico was at that time the archbishop of Naples, and he received Don Matteo immediately, for the priest was a man of extraordinarily brilliant gifts and well known to the prelate, who liked him and had caused him to be made a canon of the cathedral not many years earlier.

Don Matteo, as was right in such a position, laid the whole matter before him as a theoretical case of conscience, without names, and without any useless details which might by any possibility give a clue to his real penitent's identity. He stated it all with great clearness and force, but he dwelt much upon the spotless life of charity and good works which the man had led, in spite of his one chief sin. He knew, when Don Teodoro spoke of having spent his father's fortune, that almost every penny of it had gone to the poor of Naples in one way or another, and he had seen at a glance how his poor friend had in his youth exaggerated his boyish admiration for his stepmother. But Don Matteo put the main point very clearly before the cardinal — always as a purely theoretical case of conscience, asking what a confessor's duty would be in such an extremely difficult situation.

The cardinal listened attentively, and then was silent for some time.

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"The first thing to be done," he said at last, "would be to make a priest of him. He is evidently a man with a vocation, and the chain of circumstances which led him into this sin and difficulty is a very strange one. I hardly know what to say of it — left alone with savages only just converted — well, he was wrong, of course. But the man you represent in your theoretical case is supposed to be in all other respects almost a holy man."

"Yes, a man of holy life," said Don Matteo, earnestly.

"I do not see how a man of such disposition could have been so lacking in courage afterwards," said the cardinal.

"But suppose that it were exactly as I represent the case, Eminence, what should the confessor do?"

The cardinal looked into his eyes long and gravely.

"I should think it best to make a priest of him as soon as possible," he said at last.

"But how? No bishop could ordain him a priest without knowing his story."

"I would ordain him, if he came to me. I think I should be doing right."

"But then your Eminence would know him, and the secret of confession would have been betrayed."

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"That is true. Let him go to another bishop and tell his story."

"Another bishop might not think as your Eminence does. Besides, the question is what the confessor is to do under the circumstances."

The cardinal suddenly rose, went to the broad window, and looked out thoughtfully. Don Matteo stood up respectfully, waiting. It seemed to him a long time before the prelate turned, and what he did then surprised the priest very much, for he went to each of the three doors of the room in succession, opened it, looked out, closed it again and locked it. Then he came back to Don Matteo.

"Are you, to the best of your belief, in a state of grace, my friend?" he asked in a low voice. "Have you no mortal sin on your conscience? Reflect well. This is a grave matter."

"I cannot think of any, Eminence," answered the good priest, after a moment's pause.

"Very well. We are alone here. The case of conscience you have laid before me is a very extraordinary one. I do not wish to know whether it has actually come before you in confession. But if it has, — or if it should, — I should wish you to be in a position to help that poor man and set his life straight, by the grace of God, without injuring him, and, above all, without injuring any of those persons to whom he has administered the sacraments. I have known you a long time, Don

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Matteo, and I can trust you to make no use of any power I give you, before the world. I have the power and the right to consecrate a bishop any priest whom I think a fit person. Kneel down here, say the 'Confiteor,' and I will lay my hands on you. You could then give the penitent absolution and ordain him a priest privately."

Don Matteo started in utmost surprise, and hesitated an instant.

"Kneel down," said the cardinal. "I take this upon myself."

The priest knelt, and the solemn words sounded low in the quiet little room, as the archbishop laid his hands upon Don Matteo's grey head. When the latter rose, he kissed the cardinal's ring, trembling a little, for it had all been very unexpected. The cardinal embraced him in the ecclesiastical fashion, and then, to his further amazement, drew off his episcopal ring and slipped it upon Don Matteo's finger, took his own bishop's cross and chain from his neck and hung it about Don Matteo's neck.

"Keep them both in memory of this morning," said the prelate. "But hide the chain and the cross under your cassock, for people need not see that you are a bishop, when you sit among the canons in church. You know it, I know it, your penitent must know it if the case is a real one, and the Pope shall know it — but no one else living need ever

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guess it. Will you kindly unlock the doors? Thank you. We will not mention this occurrence again, if we can help it. Good morning, Don Matteo — good morning, my friend."

When Don Matteo was in the street again, he stood still and passed his hand over his eyes, trying to collect his thoughts. His bishop's ring touched his forehead, and he realized that it was all true. He had not been half an hour in the archbishop's palace, and when he reached his own door, he had not been absent an hour from the house.

He found Don Teodoro in the same room and still in the same chair, into which he had dropped exhausted when Don Matteo had gone out, his head sunk on his breast, his hands clasped despairingly on his knees. As the door opened, he looked up with scared eyes, and rose.

"Courage!" exclaimed Don Matteo, patting his shoulder just as he had done before going out. "I have seen his Eminence."

Don Teodoro looked at him in mute and resigned expectation, and wondered at his cheerful face. But his friend made him sit down again, and told him all that had taken place, and then, before Don Teodoro could recover his astonishment and emotion, he found himself kneeling on the floor and heard the words of absolution spoken softly over him. A moment later he felt upon his head the laying of hands and heard those still more solemn

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words pronounced over him, which he had never hoped to hear said for himself.

When he rose to his feet at last, he saw Don Matteo wrapping up the bishop's cross and chain and ring in the same piece of clean white paper in which he kept the old stole.

But Don Teodoro went to his little room, which was ready for him as usual, and he was not seen again on that day. Several times Don Matteo went softly to the door. Once he heard the old man sobbing within as though his heart would break, all alone; and once again he heard his voice saying Latin prayers in a low tone; and the third time all was very still, and Don Matteo knew that the worst was past.

On the next morning very early Don Teodoro came out of his room. Neither of the two spoke of what had happened, but the clear light was in the old priest's eyes again, clearer and happier than before, and little by little the lines smoothed themselves from his singular face until there were no more there than there had been for years. All that day they talked together of books and of Don Teodoro's great history of the Church. But they were both thoughtful and subject to moments of absence of mind.

It was not until the evening of the third day that Don Teodoro asked his friend a question.

"What do you advise me to say to the prin-

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cess?" he inquired, when they were alone together.

"Tell her that you have consulted an ecclesiastical authority and that there was an irregularity about the marriage with Don Gianluca so that you must solemnly marry them again before they can consider themselves man and wife. And tell the Baron of Guardia that the same authority is sure that he was not married to the princess, but is a free man. It is very simple, and there can be no possible mistake, now."

"Yes," said Don Teodoro. "It is very simple."

And so it was, for Cardinal Campodonico deserved the reputation he enjoyed of being, in ecclesiastical affairs, a man equal to the most difficult emergencies, in character, in keen discernment, and in prompt action.

But Don Teodoro sighed softly when he had spoken, for he thought of Taquisara and of what that brave and silent man would suffer when he was forced to stand by Gianluca's side and see the rings exchanged and the hands joined, and hear the words spoken which must cut him off forever from all hope. But Taquisara, at least, in his suffering, would have the consolation of having been honest and true and loyal from first to last. He would never have to bear the consequences of having been a coward at a great moment. It could not be so very hard for him, after all, thought Don Teodoro.

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And he saw no reason for curtailing his stay in Naples, since there was time until the first of January. On the contrary, he grew glad of those long days, in which he could meditate on the past and think of the future, and be supremely and humbly thankful for the great change that had come into his life.

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CHAPTER XXIX.

Don Teodoro wrote a few words to Taquisara, embodying what Don Matteo had advised him to say. He added also that matters had not turned out as he had expected and that he should return to Muro as usual on the twentieth of the month. The Sicilian read the letter twice and then burned it carefully. He was neither surprised nor disappointed by its contents, though he had expected that there would be much more difficulty in undoing what had been done. There was clearly nothing more to be said, as there was most certainly nothing more to hope. Don Teodoro had undoubtedly consulted the archbishop of Naples, thought Taquisara, and such a decision was final and authoritative.

He had succeeded in forcing himself into a sort of mechanical regularity of life which helped him through the day. Gianluca needed him still, though less than formerly, and as long as he could be of use, and could control his face and voice, he would stay in Muro. Since Veronica had fixed the first of January as a limit, he could hardly find an excuse for going away during the last

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three weeks of the time, when he could still be of infinite service to his friend on the journey to Naples.

On the whole, he considered himself very little. It was easier to do his utmost, and to invent more than his utmost to be done, than it would be to live an idle life anywhere else.

Again, as in the early days, he avoided Veronica when he could do so, without attracting Gianluca's attention, and Veronica herself kept out of his way as much as she could. Without words they had a tacit understanding that they would never be left alone together, even for an instant.

One day, by chance, going in opposite directions through the house, they opened opposite doors of the same room and faced each other unexpectedly. For a single instant both paused, and then came forward to pass each other. Veronica held her head high and looked straight before her, for they had met already on that day, and there was no reason why she should speak to him. But Taquisara could not help looking into her face, and he saw how hard it tried to be and yet how, in spite of herself, it softened almost before she had passed him. He turned and glanced at her retreating figure, and her head was bent low, and her right hand, hanging by her side, opened and shut twice convulsively, in his sight.

He had not dared to suggest to himself until

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then that she might possibly love him, but in the flash of that quick passing he almost knew it. Then, before he had closed the door behind him and entered the next room, the knowledge was gone, and he cursed himself for the thought, as though it had been an insult to her. If he should have to pass her alone again, he would rather cut off his right hand than turn and look at her. But that one moment, past and gone, had life in it to torment him night and day.

Gianluca was no better, and no worse. He wheeled himself about the great rooms, and on fine mornings Veronica took him to drive. She read to him, played bésique with him, fenced with Taquisara to amuse him; she devoted herself to him in every way; but as day followed day, she invented all sorts of occupations and games which should take the place of conversation. Anything was better than talking with him, now; anything was better than to hear him say that he loved her, expecting her to pronounce the words.

He himself lost heart suddenly.

"I shall never walk again," he said, one afternoon, as they sat together in the big room.

The days were very short, for it was mid-December, and the lamps had been brought. They had been out in the carriage, and when Taquisara had lifted him from his seat, he had made a desperate attempt to move his legs, a sud-

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den effort into which he had thrown all the concentrated hope and will that were still in him. But there had been neither motion nor sensation, and all at once he had felt that it was all over, forever.

Veronica looked at him quickly, and he was watching her face. He saw no contradiction there of what he had said, but only a little surprise that he should have said it.

"You may not be able to walk as soon as we thought," she answered gently. "But that is no reason why you should never walk at all."

"I am afraid it is," he said.

She stroked his hand, as she often did, and her eyes wandered from his face to the other side of the room, and back again.

"I have been trying very hard to get well," he continued presently. "Harder than any one knows."

"I know," Veronica answered. "You are so brave!"

"Brave? No. I am desperate. Do you think I do not know what it must be to you, to be tied to a hopeless cripple like me?"

"Tied? I?" She spoke bravely, for it would have been a deadly cruelty not to contradict him. "It is for you," she went on. "You must not think of me as tied to you, dear, as you call it! I did it gladly, of my own free will, and I knew what I was doing."

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"Ah no!" he answered sadly. "You could not have known what you were doing, then. Your whole life has only saved half of mine."

A chill of fear shot through Veronica's heart.

"Dear," she said anxiously and nervously. "Have I done anything to make you talk like this?"

"Yes, love, you have done much," he answered, with a tender, regretful look. "No — do not start! I am sorry that you did not understand. It is because you do so much, because you give your whole life for my wretched existence, because I know what my hours of happiness cost you now and will cost you hereafter. That is why I say these things. It would have been so much easier and simpler if I had died with my hand in yours, that day, when Don Teodoro married us. Veronica — tell me — did he say all the words? I fainted, I think."

"Yes," answered Veronica, still pale. "He said all the words."

"And did he give us the benediction?"

"Yes, he gave us the benediction."

Gianluca sighed.

"Then it cannot be undone, dear," he said softly. "You must forgive me."

"I would not have it undone, Gianluca."

And before that great unselfishness, Veronica bowed her head down, until her lips kissed his

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hands. But as she touched them, she heard the door open, and instantly she was erect again, and trying to smile. Taquisara came in.

Veronica rose, for she felt that she could not sit still by Gianluca's side, with his words in her ear, her own scarcely cold upon her lips, and the man for whom she would have given her soul's salvation, who would have died ten deaths for her, standing quietly there, looking on. She walked nervously up and down the room.

"Should you like to fence?" asked Taquisara. "We have not touched a foil to-day."

Anything seemed good which could pass the time without talking. But to her it seemed heartless just then.

"No," she answered, almost curtly. "It seems to me that we are always fencing."

But Gianluca understood why she refused. And to him, perhaps, anything was better than thinking.

"Please do!" he said. "I enjoy it so much!"

Mechanically and without a word, she went to the corner where the foils and other things were kept in a great carved chest.

Taquisara moved a large table out of the way, pushing it slowly before him.

"Do you think you can see? Or shall we have more lamps?" asked Veronica.

"I can see very well — as well as one can, by lamp-light," answered Taquisara, as he placed the

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lamps together upon the table, so that the light should fall sideways upon them when they fenced.

Veronica was glad to slip her mask over her face, just then. She was conscious of the fact when she had done it, though she hardly knew what she was doing as she took a foil from the long chest and stepped out into the room to meet Taquisara. Then, as he raised his arm to engage and she still held her foil down, her habitual interest in the amusement momentarily asserted itself.

"Shall we try that feint of yours that you were doing the other day?" she asked. "You know, you touched me with it. I think I can meet it now, for I have been thinking about it."

"Yes, try it!" said Gianluca, from his chair.

"Certainly," answered Taquisara.

Instantly, both fell into position and engaged. Barely crossing foils, Taquisara executed the feint in question at once, and lunged his fullest length. But Veronica had thought out the right parry and answer, and was quicker than he.

His weapon ran past her head without touching her, and as he recovered himself, hers shot out after him. He uttered an exclamation as it ran under his arm, with a little soft resistance.

"Touched!" cried Veronica, at the same instant.

He said nothing. Then, a second later, she uttered a sharp cry of horror, dropped her foil upon the floor and raising her mask stared at him

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with wild, white face. Not heeding what she did, she had taken the sharp foil by mistake. It was dark in the corner where the chest stood.

"It is nothing," he said. "It is nothing, I assure you."

"What is the matter?" asked Gianluca, in astonishment, for he could not see that the foil had no button.

But Veronica did not answer him. She was close to Taquisara now, clutching his arm with both hands and staring at the wire mask which covered his face.

"You are hurt! I know you are hurt!" she said, in a voice faint with fear.

"Oh no!" he answered, with a short laugh. "I was a little surprised. Take another foil. It is nothing, I assure you."

"I know you are hurt," she repeated. "Oh God! I might have killed you —"

She felt dizzy, and sick with horror, and she clung to his arm, now, for support.

"Do you mean to say that you had the sharp foil?" asked Gianluca, beginning to understand.

"It is nothing at all," said Taquisara. "It ran through my jacket, just under the arm. It did not touch me."

"It might have run through you," said Gianluca, gravely. "It might have killed you."

"Oh — please — please —" cried Veronica, still

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clinging to Taquisara's arm and turning her pale face to Gianluca.

He looked on, and his face changed. There was something in her attitude, just for a few seconds, in her ghastly pallor, in the tones of her voice, that went through Gianluca like a knife. The dreadful instinctive certainty that she loved the man she had so nearly killed, took possession of him in a dark prevision of terror. Veronica was strong and brave, but it would have been strange indeed if she had shown nothing of what she felt.

It did not last long, and perhaps she knew what she had shown, for she dropped Taquisara's arm, and the colour rushed to her face as she stooped and picked up the foil with the green hilt. The hilts of the others were blue, like those of many Neapolitan foils, and in the lamplight she could hardly distinguish the difference.

With sudden anger Veronica set her foot upon the steel and bent it up, trying to break it. She could not, for it was of soft temper, but she bent it out of all shape, so as to be useless.

She forced herself to take another, and they fenced again for a few minutes. Gianluca watched them at first, but soon his head fell back, and he stared at the ceiling. Death had entered into his soul. He had guessed half the truth. But in the state in which he was on that evening, and after what had passed between him and Veron-

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ica, the suspicion alone would have been enough. Nothing could have saved him from it, since it was indeed the truth. Such passionate, strong love could only hide itself so long as it lived in the even, unchanging light of monotonous days. In the flash of a danger, a terror, a violent chance, its shape stood out for an instant and was not to be mistaken.

Gianluca scarcely spoke again on that evening. The next morning, before he left his own room, Taquisara was with him, walking up and down and smoking while Gianluca drank his coffee. They had been discussing the accident of the previous evening, and Taquisara had laughed over it. But Gianluca was sad and grave.

"I wish to ask you a question," he said, after a short silence. "When I fainted, that day — did Don Teodoro pronounce all the proper words? You must have heard him. Was it a real marriage, without any defect of form?"

Taquisara stopped in his walk and hesitated. After all, since Don Teodoro had written to him that the marriage must be performed again, it was much better that Gianluca should be prepared for it, since he himself had put the question.

"Since you ask me," answered Taquisara, after a moment's thought, "I may as well tell you what I know. After it was done, both Don Teodoro and I had doubts as to whether the marriage

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were perfectly valid, and he determined to consult a bishop. I suppose that he has done so, for he has written to me about it. He says that the ecclesiastical authority before whom the matter was laid declares that there were informalities, and that you must be married again. You see, in the first place, there were no banns published in church, and there was no permission from the bishop to omit publishing them. But, of course, that might be set aside. I fancy that the real trouble may have been that you were unconscious. At all events, it is a very simple matter to be married again."

"In other words, it is no marriage at all. I thought so — I thought so." Gianluca repeated the words slowly and sadly.

"What does it matter?" asked Taquisara, turning away and walking again. "It is a question of five minutes. I should think that you would be glad — "

"Yes — perhaps I am glad," said Gianluca, so low that the words were scarcely an interruption.

"Because you can be married in your full senses," continued Taquisara, bravely, "with your father and mother beside you, and all the rest of it."

Gianluca said nothing to this, and again there was a short silence. Just as Taquisara came to the table in his walk, Gianluca spoke again.

"Stop a moment," he said. "Look at me,

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Taquisara. If you were in my place, what would you do?"

Their eyes met, and Gianluca saw the quick effort of the other's features, controlling themselves, as though he had been struck unawares.

"I?" exclaimed Taquisara, taken entirely off his guard. "If I were in your place? Why—" he recovered himself—"I should get married again, as soon as possible, of course. What else should any one do?"

But the bold eyes for once looked down a little, their steadiness broken.

"You would do nothing of the sort," said Gianluca.

"What do you mean?" Again Taquisara started almost imperceptibly, and his brows contracted as he looked up sharply.

"If you were in my place," said Gianluca, "you would cut your throat rather than ruin the life of the woman you loved, by tying your misery to her for life, a load for her to carry."

"Do not say such things!" exclaimed the Sicilian, turning suddenly from the table and resuming his walk. "You are mad!"

"No—not mad. But not cowardly either. There is not much left of me, but what there is shall not be afraid. I am not truly married to her. I will not be. I will not die with that on my soul."

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"Gianluca — for God's sake do not say such things!" Taquisara turned upon him, staring.

He sat in his deep chair, his fair angel head thrown back, the dark blue eyes bright, brave, and daring — all the rest, dead.

"I say them, and I mean them," he answered. "I love her very much. I love her enough for that. I love her more than you do."

"Than I?" Taquisara's voice almost broke, as the blow struck him, but there was no fear in his eyes either. He drew a breath then, and spoke strong words. "Now may Christ forget me in the hour of death, if I have not been true to you!"

"And me and mine if I blast your life and hers," came back the unflinching answer.

A deep silence fell upon them both. At last Gianluca spoke again, and his voice sank to another tone.

"She loves you, too," he said.

"Loves me?" cried Taquisara, his brows suddenly close bent. "Oh no! Unsay that, or — no — Gianluca — how dare you even dream the right to say that of your wife?"

It was beyond his strength to bear.

"She is not my wife," said Gianluca. "You have told me so — she is not my wife. She has done what no other living woman could have done, to be my wife and to love me. But she is not my wife, and what I say is true, and right as well, your right and hers.

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"No — not that — not hers." Taquisara turned half round, against the table, where he stood, and his voice was low and broken.

"Yes, hers. You will know it soon — when I have taken my love to my grave, and left her yours on earth."

"Gianluca!"

Taquisara could not speak, beyond that, but he laid his hand upon his friend's arm and clutched it, as though to hold him back. His dark eyes darkened, and in them were the terrible tears that strong men shed once in life, and sometimes once again, but very seldom more.

Gianluca's thin fingers folded upon the hand that held him.

"You have been very true to me," he said. "She will be quite safe with you."

For a long time they were both silent. It began to rain, and the big drops beat against the windows, melancholy as the muffled drum of a funeral march, and the grey morning light grew still more dim.

"I will not go into the other room just yet," said Gianluca, quietly. "I would rather be alone for a little while."

Their eyes met once more, and Taquisara went away without a word.

That had been almost the last act of the strange tragedy of love and death which had been lived

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out in slow scenes during those many weeks. It was needful that it should come, and inevitable, soon or late. It began when Gianluca made that one last desperate effort to move, in sudden certainty of hope that ended in the instant foreknowledge of what was to be. A little thing swayed him then — such a little thing as the accident of a sharp foil, a rent in a jacket, the woman's blinding fear for the man she loved. There are many arrows in fate's quiver, and the little ones are as keen as the long shafts, and quicker to find the tender mark.

The man was born to suffer, but he had in him that something divine by which martyrs made death the witness of life and turned despair of earth to sure hope of heaven.

He had ever been a man tender and gentle. His nature did not fail him now. With exquisite devotion and thought for Veronica's happiness, and with a love for her that penetrated the short future of near death, he would not say to her what he had said to Taquisara. He would not let one breath of doubt disturb her only satisfaction while he still lived, nor trouble her with the least fear lest she had not done all her fullest to give him happiness while she could. In the end, it was his love that cut short his living, and no one knew what hours and days and nights of pain he bore, till the end came. He made of his love and his

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death a way for her life. She had given him all she had. He gave it back to her a hundred-fold, but she should not know, while he lived, that her great gift had not been to him more than she could make it, all that she wished it might be, all that she knew it was not.

He had not far to carry his burden; but except his friend, no one should know the heaviness of his heart, neither his father nor his mother, and least of all, Veronica. He could not hide that he was dying, but he could hide the cost of it, and its bitterness. After that day, his life went from him, as the strength falls away from a ship's sails when the breeze is softly dying on a summer's evening. In fear Veronica watched him, and in fear she met Taquisara's eyes. In the long nights, when it rained and there was no moon, the darkness of death's wings was in the air, and she held her breath, alone in her dim room.

They all knew it, and none said it, though shadow answered shadow in one another's faces when they met. It was as though another element than air had descended amongst them, dull, unresonant, hushing word and tread.

For each life we love is a sun, in our lives that would be dark if there were no love in them, and when it goes down to its setting in our hearts, the last light of love's day is very deep and tender, as no other is after it, and the passionate, sad twilight

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of regret deepens to a darkness of great loneliness over all, until our tears are wept, and our souls take of our mortal selves memories of love undying.

The end came soon, in the night, for it was his will to live that had kept him with them so long. Taquisara was with him. One by one the others came, hastily muffled and wrapped in dark robes, for the night was cold and damp even within doors. One after another they came, and they stood and knelt beside him on the right and left. He spoke to them all, — to his father and his mother first, for he felt the tide ebbing. With streaming eyes Veronica bent down and looked for the fading light in his, through her fast-falling tears. And close to her his mother stretched out weak hands that trembled with every breaking sob. His father knelt there, burying his face against the pillow, shaking all over, his arms hanging down loose and helpless by his sides, bent, bowed, crushed, as a weak old lion, stricken in age and cruelly wounded to death. And above them all, Taquisara's sad, deep-chiselled face looked down, as the face of a bronze statue beside a grave. Without, the winter's rain beat a low dead-march on the great windows, and the southwest wind sighed out its vast breath along the castle walls.

It was long since he had spoken, and they thought that they should never hear his voice

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again. But still the last light lingered in his eyes. Very little was left for him to do.

He moved Veronica's right hand, that was in his, drawing it a little, and she let it move; and his other held Taquisara's, and he drew it also, they yielding, till the two touched, and at his dying will clasped one another. Then he smiled faintly, his last smile on earth. And as it faded forever, there came back to them from beyond all pain the words of his blessing upon their two strong young lives.

"Benedicat vos omnipotens Deus —" and the angels heard the rest.

Thus died Gianluca della Spina.

THE END.

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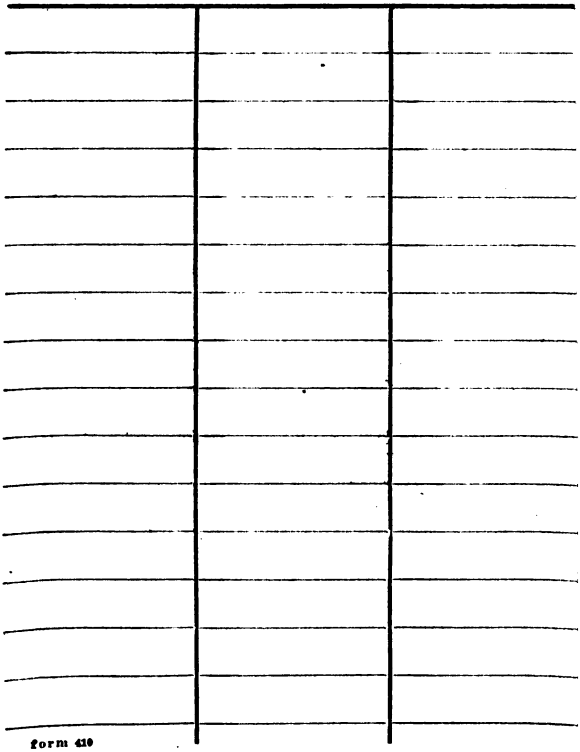

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